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Erotic Sculptures of Eastern India

Malaysankar Bhattacharyya
&
Susanta Kumar Biswas

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FOREWORD

Our amazement over the erotic sculptures on the walls of the Indian temples along with the numerous icons of secular and religious nature just doesn't seem to die. So much has been written, pictographically presented, often acrimoniously debated, and of course ruthlessly desecrated, not too early in the past. Yet, they don't seem to be enough. Almost with a periodic regularity we come across new publications of articles or photographic collections that emphasize on their aesthetic value, immortality of the artistic geniuses who chiselled them, and of course with the streak of overwhelming sexuality in those creations. Rarely have any of them delved into the historical perspective of these immortal structures and the religiosity of contemporary Hindu or Buddhist ideas that motivated the forces behind such creations.

To put it straight, the intermingling of aesthetic appeal, sensuality and religion in those erotic sculptures besides their historical background and iconographic excellence are the all important dimensions of those wonderful creations. Any attempt to understand these sculptures ought to be incomplete without understanding all these dimensions. This book therefore intends to explore sculptural eroticism of Eastern India in its entirety.

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

It is not really known when exactly our nature-worshipping forefathers, switched over to *Brahmanical* religion, and accepted idol-worship into their fold. But we do have evidences[1] that by the turn of the first millennium BC, our ancestors, along with their regular worship of *Agni (Fire)*, *Varuṇa (Wind & Rain)*, *Indra (lightning)*, were also worshipping the likes of Śiva, Viṣṇu, and several types of mother goddesses, in their iconographic forms. And by the end of the first millennium BC such idolatry was so deeply entrenched in the *Brahmanical* religion, that there appears evidences[2] of cult rivalries between the *Vaiṣṇavites (worshippers* of Viṣṇu), and the *Souras (worshippers* of Sun-god or *Sūrya*).

Evidently, the Early-Vedic Aryans were not idol worshippers. On the contrary, they were worshippers of non-iconic constituents of nature like, fire, rain, lightning, wind, or earth. The iconic forms of these natural forces were only developments of the Later-Vedic ages, somewhat in consonance with the already accepted icons of Śiva, Viṣṇu, or the Mother goddesses, whose names have constantly undergone changes to the ones like Umā, Satī, Durgā, Pārvatī, or Kālī.

The obvious question therefore is where and how did the Aryans source their iconographic inclinations from. The answer perhaps lay in the almost contemporary but parallel religious trend of Tantra or Tantricism whose origin is shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, in all probability Tantricism had its roots in the ancient magic rituals, practised by the primitive people. Contrary to the historically accepted fact that the Aryans were immigrants from the west as were their Vedic religious practices, Tantricism was an esoteric tradition of purely Indian origin. Although as a potent religious practice it made itself known by around 500 AD, it is widely believed that Tantricism evolved much earlier, in all likelihood at least a thousand years ago and remained in the peripheral realms of the Indian society for many centuries. Presumably, the politico-racial domination of the Aryans made Vedic religious

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practice the most prevalent and visible one for one thousand years of India's socio-religious history. But the fact that Tantricism as an independent religious practice continued to flow on is proved from the fact that within a span of a few hundred years, the occult and totemic practices of Tantricism infiltrated into the ranks of *Bramhanical* religion[3]. Even later this manifested itself in the form of large-scale idolatry that later became the hallmark of the heterogeneous faith.

However, there are hypotheses which controvert this opinion and attribute the origin of Tantra to Tibet where Buddhism made penetration by the early centuries of the Christian era. Indigenous magic rituals underwent process of codification for centuries under the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Some other authorities are keen to highlight the role of Eastern India in the development of Tantra on the basis of the fact that Mahāyāna and its several branches like Vajrayāna, Mantrayāna, Kālacakrayāna, Śūnyayāna et al. flourished in Eastern India[4].

The arrival of Buddhism as a potent religious force from 500 BC, threw up a challenge against the ritualistic paraphernalia of *Brahmanical* religion, but only till about two centuries after the death of Buddha. Because, then it was not only the *Bramhanical* religion, but also Buddhism and Jainism that went on to accept idolatry with open arms into its fold. Ironically, it was Buddha, the greatest of all non-conformists, who went on to be worshipped as yet another icon by a large group of his followers. So, by the end of the 5th century AD, religious iconography was all over India. Be it Buddhism, Jainism, or *Bramhanism,* idolatry was the common binding force for all as well as a major source of dispute amongst themselves. It is this sub-continental or may we say, continental—as the trend had already spread far and wide to the South-East Asian countries of Kamboja (Cambodia & Laos), Śrīvijaya (Java, Bali & Sumatra), Campā (Vietnam), Śyāmadeśa (Thailand), and Subarṇabhūmi (Burma) and even to China and Central Asia, that went on to promote the constructions of monumental structures with exquisite sculptures of innumerable icons. As centuries rolled by, this trend actually overwhelmed the whole of Asia. The *Bramhanical* and Buddhist dynasties of the post-Gupta period like the Vardhana, Varmana, Pallava, Cola, Candra, Pāla, Sena, Bhauma, Śailadbhava, Gaṅga, Bhanja, et al contributed to the ever-expanding canvas of Indian art.

Much has been discussed about the architectural marvels of these monumental structures or the mammoth logistics undertaken during the course of their construction. But worldwide attention has also been drawn to the rare symbiotic existence of sensuality and divinity that these temple structures have projected in a mass scale. Whether it represents sexuality with divine overtones or divinity with sexual undertones, are matters of loud conjectures that have only grown louder over the years. But the fact remains that apart from the controversy and undue attention, these erotic sculptures along with their magnificent structures have attracted the ire of desecrating opponents that reduced many of them to heaps of dust. And not just the medieval iconoclasts, we ought to mention modern authorities of ancient Indian art who reject

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the sublimity of eroticism in Indian art in no uncertain terms. Percy Brown[5] while discussing the sculptural treasures of Khajuraho dismisses their beauty in terse words :

> But as at Konarak in Orissa, it is proved by the carvings on several of these temples, that the same sinister ritual which degraded that monumental conception also prevailed at Khajaraho, and it is possible that the religious community concerned suffered the same fate. Such may be one of the explanations for the almost complete absence of life within the precincts of these beautiful buildings, and their disuse over such a long period of time.

It is with this background that we considered it relevant to bring to light some of those still surviving monuments and their erotic sculptures in this book. Sculptures of Eastern India in particular, can match the excellence of the erotic sculptures of Khajuraho and other ancient centres of plastic art in India. But so far scant attention has been paid to this aspect of Eastern Indian plastic art. In fact only sketchy references have appeared in the voluminous works of the celebrated authorities which do little justice to the immense richness and versatility of these creations.

Historical evidences[6] are in abundance that conclusively prove that the whole of Eastern India, comprising the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Orissa, and of course Bangladesh was the seat of Tantricism and Tantrik rituals in ancient and medieval India. This overriding influence of Tantricism ingrained the concepts of cyclic existence, *saṁsāra* and *nirvāṇa,* the divine play of Śiva and Śakti, time and its embodiment — *Mahākālā,* human bondage, and divine retribution-cum-destruction, in the minds of commoners and elites. It is therefore not unnatural that there would be abundant reflection of these concepts in all contemporary creations of art and architecture in this region. From Bangarh (South Dinajpur, West Bengal), Itkhouri (Jharkhand), or the Sun Temple of Konarak (Puri district of Orissa), to the magnificent structures of Khiching (Mayurbhanj district of Orissa), the Lingaraj Temple (Bhubaneshwar, Orissa), and the much later Kamaksya Temple (Guwahati, Assam), or Unokoti and Deotamura images (Tripura),the influence is all pervasive. Similarly, the Buddhist or more precisely the *Buddhatantric* temples, starting from the cave temples of Udaygiri-Khandagiri (Bhubneshwar, Orissa) to Nalanda and Vikramasila (Bihar), and Paharpur (Rajshahi, Bangladesh), Mainamati (Coomilla,Bangladesh), Jagajjibanpur (Malda, West Bengal) make a vividly libidinal representation of the *Jātaka* and other mythological stories. We have also taken care to incorporate innumerable other erotic sculptures, recovered from several archaeological sites of Eastern India, which relate to our claim that eroticism was one of the dominant aspects of Eastern Indian School of Plastic Art.

The question that has always been a matter of immense conjecture and intense debating among the hardcore puritans and those who uphold the artists' right to freedom of expression is why was it necessary to project and portray sensuality in such graphic details to humanity? And if that was not enough, why were temples amongst everything else, chosen as the sites for display of such bold sexuality. The puritans have presented their theses, banking heavily on the

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idea of an escalating contemporary moral decadence among the Hindus and Buddhists. Their opponents have submitted their ant-theses, refuting this slapdash inference, and arguing that human physique and man-woman relationship are two fundamental yet immortal ingredients of artistic expression and there is nothing immoral in it. Rather, the ancient Indian concept of *prakiti* and *purusha* as the ultimate of male-female relationship, be it *Bramhanical* or Buddhist overwhelmed the psyche of ancient Indian artists. And not just in the Indian sub-continent or later in South-East Asia, even in Hellenic and Roman Occident and ancient Egypt and Babylonia, they were as much sacrosanct as here. So, setting aside this never-ending debate, it would not be repetitive to explore the iconographic details of some of those immortal creations that had emerged successful through the ravages of time with a reference to the historical perspectives.

Before we conclude our introductory observation and move on to our actual discussion, our readers need to appreciate that India, especially its eastern region, has been a land of plenty. The soft loamy soil, with the abundance of rainfall, made it one of the most fertile tracts for agriculture. Compared to the scarcities and struggles elsewhere, life here, had always been a model of plenty. It is this richness that had nurtured the dynamics of life through ages. This dynamics manifested in the form of a very prominent fertility cult[7] , where its progenitors found the female body as the perfect symbol of sustenance. Temple after temple, sculpture after sculpture, uphold this saga of fertility and life or life through fertility. Worshipping a female deity or many more of them, in their absolute feminism was therefore a logical corollary.

Ironically, it was this zest for life and its manifestation through the vignettes of feminine curvatures that blew up on the face of those puritanical religions where god remained a supreme, shapeless, unseen, and inconceivable force. That, this conceptual polarization was volatile enough to infuriate the opponents of idolatry, and induce them to extreme forms of militancy, was realized too late. By that time, a vast majority of these wonderful structures have been razed to dust. More of that would be discussed in our concluding chapter but the bottom line is that what we are left with are sadly the bare remnants of those wonderful creations.

It would be pertinent to add a small disclaimer that although this book has made a balanced representation of erotic sculptures of all the architectural monuments that we have already mentioned in the previous page, while the sculptures in black basalt retain their originality in the pictures, those in sand stone do not. This is not because of our lacunae in their photographic representation, but because sand stone as a material has weathered or eroded more with the ravages of time.

Notes

1. D.D.Kosambi, *Introduction of Ancient Indian History and Culture.*
2. C.Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata by Ved Vyas* (a translation).

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3. Georg Feuerstein, *Tantra, The Path of Ecstacy,* Pp.10-17.
4. See for details, M.S. Bhattacharyya, *Glimpses of Buddhist Bengal.*
5. Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture(Buddhist and Hindu)*, p.129.
6. See for details, R.C. Majumder, *History of Bengal, Vol 1.*
7. See for details, M.S.Bhattacharyya, 'Bengal Art through Ages: Evolution of Cults', *The Historical Review,* Vol XVII, 2009.

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TWO

THE MILIEU AND THE MOSAIC

It is worthwhile to begin by having a brief look back at the political and socio-economic history of Eastern India or what has time and again been referred as *Prācya,* during the ancient and early medieval periods. Although it is not at all easy to define the geographical expanse of the region *Prācya* in terms of the modern demarcations that we are acquainted with, we do have some classified historical data to draw a rough sketch. Ancient Bengal certainly formed a part of the *Prācyadeśa* or the eastern country. So was Assam and the entire Northeast India. But ancient literary sources differ with each other over the boundaries of the eastern country or the other sub-regions that could or could not have formed a part of this region. Sources like Boudhyana or Manu consider Prayāga as the western boundary of the *Prācya,* while the commentary on the *Vātsāyanasūtra* pushes it further east to the sub-region named Aṅga, which roughly corresponds to Bhagalpur in Bihar and its adjoining areas. The *Mahābhāgya* and the *Divyavadāna* mention Kajaṅgala as the western boundary of the *Prācya*[1]. Kajaṅgala is identifiable with Rajmahal in Jharkhand and the area in its neighbourhood[1] . It would therefore seem that the definition of *Prācya* had something to do with the passage of time and the expansion of the zone of influence of the North Indian civilization, arguably called the Aryan civilization. The chronology of the works mentioned here to fore would support this theory.

It is now accepted by all well known historians that during their height of political eminence, the Pāla empire ruled over a vast territory, expanding from Saket (modern day Ayodhya, Utter Pradesh) in the west to the eastern banks of Bramhaputra in the east, and from the northern plains to Bay of Bengal[2] . However, the Pāla Empire stretching from the mid 8th century AD to the middle of 12th century AD, with the usual fluctuations of military fortunes, was certainly not able to control this vast region throughout those four hundred years. It is more or less accepted that their core area stretched from Campā (Bhagalpur, Bihar) and Magadha (Northern Bihar) in the west to Prāgjyotiṣpur (Assam) in the east, and from the northern

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plains of Bengal to the sea. By and large, this is regarded as the *prāchya* region[3] . And if we look at the land formations of this region, we would be able to notice a degree of uniformity in the entire stretch. Vast plains of soft, loamy, alluvial soil, surrounded by rocky areas in its fringes, and plenty of water both from the innumerable snow-fed as well as rain-fed rivers, and of course the heavy rainfall that this region was privy to, made it a unique region in the sub-continent.

The question that follows is whether this uniqueness was a development of 7th to 8th century AD, or was it also a feature in the first millennium BC or even earlier than that. As seen from the Khalimpur inscription of Dharmapāla[4] and other sources like the account of Lama Tārnāth, the Rājataraṅginī and the Nidhanpur copper plate inscription of king Bhāskaravarman, that during the *mātsyanyā* phase which lasted for a century or so, this region was plundered by forces from neighbouring Kamarupa, Kanyakubja, Utkala, and even from faraway Kashmir. These certainly hint to the fact that even prior to the Pāla rule in *Prācya*, this region had its own distinct identity as a land of prosperity. Similarly, the Paharpur and Mahasthangarh inscriptions[5] also corroborate the fact that even during the Gupta era, stretching from the middle of 3rd century AD to early 6th century AD, and even earlier, towards the beginning of the Christian era, under the Mauryas, this region was widely known for its prosperity. Needless to say, that this prosperity of *Prācya* was instrumental in generating and mobilizing the resources necessary for the construction of some of the most remarkable monuments of this sub-continent. As of now our area of focus will include the ancient regions of Mithilā (North-eastern Bihar), Magadha (Central Bihar), Uttara and Dakshina Rāḍha (Northern and Southern parts of West Bengal), the whole of Vaṅga (Bangladesh), Samataṭa (parts of south-eastern Bengal and Tripura, including coastal parts of Bangladesh), the northern parts of Utkala (Orissa) and Kāmarupa (eastern Assam).

The earliest historical references[6], starting from the beginning of the first millennium BC, down to the early medieval ones, all speak highly about the prosperity of *Prācya.* The main plank of this economic resplendence was of course the agricultural prosperity. The fertile alluvial soil, powered by the abundance of rainfall, easily made it a surplus food-grain region; so much so that while the northern and western tracts of India had to wait till the invention of iron-tipped plough for the phenomenal agricultural expansion, *Prācya* was privileged by having a soft loamy soil which did not need the technological support of the iron-tipped plough. As R.S Sharma observed that, while because of the relatively hard nature of soil in northern and north-western India, it was the invention of iron-tipped plough that worked wonders, in *Prācya* region even the wooden plough was enough for the soft soil. All that *Prācya* needed was the reclaimation of vast forest land and put them under cultivation. Quite naturally, historians like D.D.Kosambi or R.S.Sharma, all found eastern India surplus in agricultural production from very early times. This wide expansion of cultivation in turn opened two more planks in the economy of this region. While the surplus food grains generated enough trade and merchandise

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to develop a thriving community of traders, the agriculture also needed a huge volume of tools and implements that were to be prepared by a growing community of blacksmiths and craftsmen, including potters, rope-makers, and carpenters.

A far clearer picture of the economic progress of the *Prācya* region is available from the *Jātaka* stories that relate to the periods between 5th century BC and 2nd century BC[7]. According to T.W. Rhys Davis, these stories give graphic description of the newly evolving techniques of crop cultivation, like the use of transplantation of the saplings from a small bed or nursery to the larger crop-growing field, the use of bull as aid in cultivation, and rudimentary techniques of irrigation. R.S. Sharma further adds that it was also the time when rudimentary cash crop cultivation was initiated in the Gangetic plains of northern India and gradually spread to the east in the *Prācya* region[8]. So, by the end of the millennium and the beginning of the Christian era, the economy of the *Prācya* region was one where huge tracts of land had been brought under rice cultivation, and these areas by the aid of improved agricultural techniques as well as heavy rainfall, were producing as much of the precious grain as not only to adequately feed the growing population of its own area, but also to sell off a substantial quantity of its produce to neighbouring areas, including northern and north-western India. In exchange they bought cash crops like, sugarcane and cotton from the neighbouring western states. What this eventually implied was the development of certain pockets of *Prācya* as attractive centres of trade and merchandise.

Once the trade centres had started functioning smoothly on exchange of grain, it was not long before other commodities of daily usage like grey pottery, copper implements, iron tools viz. axe, sickle, plough, etc., hunting equipments like arrows, knives, etc., cotton, molasses, and of course livestock — primarily cows, made into the list of trading commodities. The *Vinayapiṭaka* or *Majjhimanikāya* shows how the gradual expansion of trade led to an increasing specialization of job. The weaver, the barber, the goldsmith, the blacksmith, the carpenter, the livestock rearer, the potter, and so many other varied professions led to the classification of the society along with the economic resplendence. It was not long before areas grew up as designated trade hubs, attracting large hordes of migrating population. As Rhys Davis points out, these trade hubs mostly grew up along the course of the river as well as near the sea i.e. Bay of Bengal. The navigable rivers were – to name a few, Gaṅga, Mahānandā, Koshī, Sone. Gaṇḍak, Punarbhabā, Taṅgan, Śrimatī, Nāgar, Átreyee, Brahmaputra, Barāk, Yamunā, Kaṅgsabatī, Ajoy, Dāmodar, Kunoor, Kopāī, Dvārakeśvar, Subarṇrekhā, Mayūrākṣī, Śīlābatī, Mahānadi, Dayā, Brāhmaṇī, Vaitaraṇī, Bālam, Devī, Bhārgavī and Bhadrā.

As early as the Mauryan period we find from the Mahasthangarh Brahmi inscription, reference to the existence of granaries for public welfare and trade. At the beginning of the Gupta era, *Prācya* was already developed into one of the most active economic zones of the sub-continent, buzzing with various cross-currents of religious ideologies, and attracting

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trading bigwigs and religious preachers with the same intensity[9] .And the interesting feature of this development was that these religious preachers became active patrons of trade and merchandise and vice versa. The *Aṅguttaranikāya,* and *Digghanikāya,* Pali Buddhist texts, elaborately speaks about the Buddhist-*sreṣthī* (trader) nexus. Even Pānini in his works mention the various categories of traders like *Govaṇij (traders* of cows), *Ashvavaṇij (trader* of horses), *Gandhavanij (trader* of perfumes), *Madravaṇij (trader* of liquor), *Samuddavaṇij (sea*-going merchants) and such others. Even more interesting is the fact that according to Pānini these different categories of traders settled at designated pockets of the evolving urban hamlets and formed their respective associations or guilds. The relative affluence of the various guilds and the areas they resided or set up their trading centres went on to construct large entry-gates, lengthy boundary walls, wide roads, elaborate drainage, and buildings including shops and warehouses. Later this affluence went on to be reflected in their sponsoring of the construction of varying sizes and shapes of religious monuments in such river-port trade centres like, Vārāṇasi, Kauśāmbi, Rājagṛha, Śrāvastī, Gorakhpur, Pāṭaliputra, Sāket, Campā, Koṭivarśa, Puṇḍravardhana, Karṇasuvarṇa, Gauḍa, Karmānta, Vikramapur, Bhuvaneśvar, or sea-ports like, Tāmralipta, Gaṅge, Konārak, or Avanti.

Now, as economic surplus began to accumulate in these trade hubs, the tale-tale signs of affluence began to manifest itself in the form of impressive buildings and monuments. Religion being one of the strongest motivational forces in the life of the ancient and medieval people it went on to attract the lion's share of such human expressions. So, by the beginning of the Christian era we have a growing urban populace, settled in an ever increasing number of urban centres in the *Prācya* region. This urban populace identified themselves with one or the other religious communities and was too eager to display their uniqueness through the setting up of a bigger and more impressive religious monument. It is further interesting to note that Pāṇini mentioned that majority of such urban centres were concentrated in the *Prācya* region. It may therefore be logically presumed that a sizable chunk of the religious monuments sponsored by the traders' guilds would be concentrated in the *Prācya* region. But having said about the economic factors which were contributors that led the growth of such a large number of religious monuments, we would now see how the change of political forces made an equally significant contribution.

There is no doubt that northern India was ahead in the evolution of states. But eastern India or *Prācya* soon caught up in the race for setting up of new and strong political entities. As the fast-growing urban centres soon doubled up as administrative centres, *Prācya* had quite a few of them. The most significant of them was Pātaliputra. First the Nanda dynasty, and then the Mauryas grew too tall in the battle for political supremacy. As Gordon Child[10] mentions that this urbanization was largely instrumental in the evolution of these new age political forces. Initially, it were these urbanized centres which also became the administrative centers in the *ṣoḍaśa mahājanapadas* or the sixteen states. Then when the states made way for the better

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organized and more powerful imperial forces, these urbanized areas went on to form the capitals and political nerve centres of such empires. In eastern India or the *prācya* region the ruling imperial forces of Haryaṅka, Śaiśunāga, and then the Nandas and Mauryas made Pāṭaliputra the political and administrative centre of *Prācya.*

The evolution of successful empires with their vast administrative and military networks necessitated the overall control of trade by these imperial forces for the interest of generating revenue to fill the state coffers. This in turn required a state economic policy to acquire the agricultural and trade surplus, to be utilized in the interests of the state. A reflection of such a utilitarian policy is reflected in contemporary theorist Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* -- a treatise on state economic and political governance[11]. The identification and categorization of land, imposition of various rates of taxes on the basis of such categorization, imposition of taxes on commodities imported and exported through the river and sea ports, or the taxes for utilization of other trade facilities like warehouses and roads, as stated in the *Arthaśāstra* clearly suggest the state control of the country's or the empire's economy. Under such circumstances, all such activities that were financed by the trade bodies in the urban centres also came to be controlled by the ruling political and administrative forces[12]. By the time of emperor Aśoka, the complete state control of all socio-religious activities which included the construction of religious monuments, mass congregation centres, city-entrance porches, and even transit rest houses were evident. Needless to say that religion as a whole had by then already gone under the influence of the state. So religion not only became a part of the state policy, but even went on to influence the foreign policy as evident from emperor Aśoka's sending of emissaries to Burma, Ceylon, or Indonesia. The setting up of innumerable *stūpas* within his own empire as well as on foreign land bears testimony to this approach.

At the beginning of the Gupta era, especially during the reign of Samudragupta, the Indian trade and merchandise had spread far and wide, across the length and breath of the entire subcontinent and so had the guilds. Their affluence was clearly reflected in the accounts of foreign travellers who time and again express their awe at the opulent residential buildings and trade outlets. Whether it was *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* by an unknown Greek sailor, Strabo's *Geographicon*, Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, Deodorus's *Bibliothikas Historique*, or the accounts of Ptolemy, Han-Zu, and Xuang Zang, all were euphoric in the description of contemporary Indian affluence by dint of trade[13]. As the number of items on trade expanded, so did the affluence of the traders dealing in such commodities. Agriculture still continued to be the mainstay of the economy and in fact expanded further in volume by virtue of irrigation, and diversified further by large-scale cultivation of cash crops like cotton, coconut, sugarcane, and spices like black pepper, red chilli, cardamom, ginger, etc. But industries based on cotton, coir, and sugarcane was also opening up to cater to the diverse tastes of the growing populace. And by the time the Kuṣāṇas had established their empire in the north and north-western India, many of these industrial products by virtue of their qualitative excellence, had captured a sizable chunk of the foreign markets of Rome, Athens, and Alexandria.

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The phenomenal increase in the volume of trade across national and international frontiers naturally required the support of banking facilities and the Buddhist monasteries came on to provide this support. Despite being ideologically opposed to the very concept of money-lending and earning interest, the Buddhist monasteries by dint of their widely spread network, institutional advantage, and the availability of infrastructural facilities like food, lodging, and security in remote areas, made them perfect interlocutors in monetary transactions. While their institutional acceptance over a vast geographical area gave them the much needed fidelity in providing such banking services, their widely spread network and basic infrastructure assured all trading bodies the reliability[14]. In due course these banking institutions became so large and powerful that during the reign of the Pālas in *Prācya,* even the ruling authorities went on to borrow from them to finance their vast army or maintain the logistics thereof[15]. It was these credit cartels that were the real manipulators in India's administrative and military governance from the 5th century AD to 12th century AD. It was also these credit cartels who funded and sponsored the gigantic monuments that we would be discussing in Chapter Two.

As we have discussed so far that it were the credit cartels as well as other trade guilds who were the main fund providers or sponsors in constructing the great monuments of religious, social, or administrative importance. But it should be mentioned in the same vein that the approval of the political and administrative force was also a must. As it happened that in most of the cases it were the political and administrative bosses who earmarked and donated the land on which the monument actually came up[16]. Archaeological excavations in Bihar, West Bengal and Bangladesh have revealed several such land grants made by the Pāla rulers in *Prācyadeśa.* But certainly that was not the only link that the ruling forces had with the monuments constructed within their empires. The size, the thematic content, the artistic flamboyance, the quality and quantity of materials to be used, definitely required their stamp of approval[17]. The question that remains to be explored is whether the degree of sensuality and lasciviousness expressed in those sculptures also had the approval of the ruling forces. To this must be added the quintessential question of social milieu as well as the ethos of the society which approved of such expression of plastic art.

We have so far seen through the projection of the contemporary political and economic conditions the resources that funded and sponsored the construction of the magnificent monuments in the *Prācya* region. But what we also need to explore is the contemporary society and religion that actually precipitated the overwhelming spirit of sensuality in many of them — a factor which would later become the reason for its own destruction by non-conforming puritans and rabid iconoclasts of Central Asia, and the Middle-east.

Several seals unearthed provide vital archaeological inputs in reconstructing the *Prācya* society during the four century old Pāla rule. The matter that assumes foremost importance

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was the extreme liberalism of the Pala emperors. They were avowed followers of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Yet, many of them were great patrons of Śaivism. A number of Śaiva temples were built by them including a big one in Koṭivarṣa, located in present day South Dinajpur in West Bengal. At the same time there are enough evidences to suggest that Vaiṣṇavism was no less popular. But what is even more interesting is the religious harmony among the various religious groups. Buddhist temple walls proudly depicted the scenes from the famous epics — Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata[18]. The walls of Nalanda are full of sculptures of *Gandharvas, Kinnaras, Yakṣas,* which are an integral part of the Vaiṣṇava or the Śaiva mythologies.

The other noticeable feature was the Pāla rulers' efforts to maintain the caste system, despite being avowed Mahāyāna Buddhists. And indeed the sculptures of the Pāla era bear testimony to such monarchical motives. There appears to be a noticeable difference in the dress pattern of the women of the higher and the lower castes. While the upper caste men wore a scarf on the upper part of the body, hanging down the long piece of cloth round their neck, those of the lower caste wore nothing such. In case of women the upper part was either bare or a bodice would cover their breasts. Lower caste women were however always bare, their breasts being covered only by a bunch of pearl-beads or plaits of long hair. As for the lower half of the body, *dhoti* for men and *sāri* for women was common. But while the upper caste men and women wore them long to cover the entire length of their legs, the lower caste ones wore them short[19].

As understandable and evident from the sculptures that we would be discussing in Chapters Three, the dress pattern of both the higher classes as well as the lower classes, were sufficiently provocative by the modern standards. But whether they were desired to have the same effect is still not clear. All through the sculptures, whether depicting a lower caste dancer, a woman depicted as doing a menial job, or a woman representing the affluent classes, or even the feminine deities, are presented in see-through garments, with voluptuous exhibition of feminine curves. Interestingly enough the same spirit is reflected in the contemporary literature like Sandhyākaranandi's *Rāmacaritam,* Jaydeva's *Gītagovindam,* Govardhanāchārya's *Āryāsaptaśatī, Caryāpada,* or Jimutavāhana's *Dohākoṣa* .Almost all of them give graphic description of the women's physical beauty, her *śṛṇgāra* or dressing up for attracting the attention of the male partner, elaborate description of their courtship and ultimately the love making. And here again the descriptions have subtle differences between the upper and the lower castes. While the women of the upper class *kulastrī* (married woman) is often depicted as sober and demure, that of the lower caste *dombi* (feminine of *dom*) or *śabarī* (feminine of *śabara*) is depicted as promiscuous and liable to infidelity[20].

Towards the end of the Pāla era and the beginning of the short lived Sena era, this trend in fact accentuates and becomes peppered with more overt forms of sensuality. The dresses of the women become more provocative, their gait more and more voluptuous[21]. So much so that not only of the commonplace women, even the sculptures depicting the goddesses also

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become more voluptuous and provocative. And the changing trend was equally reflected similarly in the literature which we have already referred. Literary works went on devoting pages after pages in describing the hip swings of a dancer, or shapes of the breasts, lips, and navel of other women.

Art historians like N.K.Bhattasali and S.K.Saraswati have attributed this overall degradation in contemporary art to the falling standards of public morality, especially the decadence affecting the people in high offices. According to one legend mentioned in the *Sekaśubhodaya,* Emperor Rāmapāla ordered the execution of his son Yakṣapāla for molesting a woman. The same book refers to another legend where Kumāradutta, the brother-in-law of King Lakṣmaṇasena assaulted a lady[22]. Without being emphatic about the historical reliability of such incidents, it may be observed with a note of caution that even if not for the common folks of the *Prācya* region during the 12th-13th century AD, a deep sense of frivolity, promiscuousness, and decadence had definitely seeped into the upper stratum of the society. The affluent urban trading community and its amassed wealth had unleashed a widespread debasement in its own rank and file as well as amongst that of the ruling sections. The bureaucrats, the high-ranked army personnel have come to be influenced by those frivolous habits and practices of the affluent classes, resulting in a general slackness and weakening of the civilian and military administration, and at the same time causing a gross loosening of the contemporary moral fabric of the region[23]. This decadence was reflected in the contemporary literature, painting[24], and sculptures[25]. And as these creations were funded by the business community and meant to please the ruling community, the creations were prescribed and designed to suit these decadent tastes.

But that was not the entire story. Another very important factor in these obtrusive libidinal expressions was the growing influence of various fertility cults in the *Prācya* region[26]. Not that these fertility cults were new and earlier unknown to the people of this region. On the contrary these cults which were of aboriginal roots had been known for ages. But during the later Vedic periods and even during the Maurya, Gupta, and a greater part of the Pāla era, they were practiced among the peripheral and marginal sections of the population. It was precisely by around the 10th-11th century AD, taking advantage of the decadent Buddhism and a Bramhanical religion which was becoming utterly confusing for the common man, by being heavily drenched in paraphernalia and senseless rituals, these cults made their entry into the religious mainstream. We would be discussing in Chapter Three, how almost imperceptibly these cults, sometimes in the form of *Tantricism,* made a lasting impression in the religious and social mainstream. It was the undeniable impact of these fertility cults that permanently imprinted the spirit of sensuality on Buddhism and the Bramhanical religions. Ironically, it was possibly the overt expression of sensuality that attracted the ire of the early Turkish invaders, leading to a prolonged phase of desecration of these magnificent structures by the other leaders of Muslim invasion.

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But that certainly was not the entire story. In the words of Debala Mitra[27]

A word is necessary on the flagrantly-erotic sculptures of Konarak, which, by their character large size and enormous number, can not fail to draw the attention of the visitor, So a strong sensual element is almost ubiquitous in the art of different places and times. Life in its voluptuously physical aspect is depicted on the terracottas of as early as the S'uṇga period (2nd and 1st centuries BC). Again, amorous adventures and the frank statements of the most earthly aspects were never a taboo in old literature. To the artists art is amoral. Apart from Konarak and many other temples of Orissa, there are centres where it plays a prominent part in temple-decoration. There does not seem to exist any canonical injunction on the occurrence of erotic sculptures on temples. No popular explanation (for example, there being the outcome of desire to ward off lightening or the evil eye) carries convictions. No less doubtful are such modern pseudo-spiritual explanations as that the sculptures were intended to test the devotees, so that those who remained psychologically unaffected by them were considered eligible to enter the sanctum sanctorum. Nor can the sculptures be regarded as illustrating *Kāma-Sāstras* (erotic texts) or tantric practices and perversions. Any plausible explanation must take into account their possible historical developments from the simple and amorous *mithunas* (couples), occurring on early temples. The artist has impartially depicted all the *rasas* (sentiments) and has in no way emphasized *s'ṛngāra* (erotics) over others. In any case, the fact stands out that the sculptor, in interspersing such sculptures with divine and other figures, did not give them any preferential or derogatory treatment, and similar must have been the attitude of the devotee who visited the temple for worship. Obviously, obtrusive and shocking to the modern eye, the ancients must have accorded sanction to such overt and uninhibited expression of eroticism for some reason or other and taken the manifestations of the primordial impulse in a natural way".

In short what we intend to impress upon our readers is that there might have been a phase of decadence as is evident from the 10th, 11th, and 12th century literature, art, and the general living patterns of contemporary society. But this was no more than a cyclical phase that comes from time to time in every civil society, and had nothing to do with the powerful expressions of sensuality and eroticism in all forms of creativity. On the contrary, this was the standard expression of artistic excellence that prevailed almost all over India and possibly more so in the *prā cya.* And almost all through the thousand years — 4th century AD to 14th century AD, such libidinal expressions have continued to remain in the same spirit. So, if it has been hailed in the Gupta era for its excellence, it ought to be done so in the Sena era as well. If it has been appreciated during the S'uṅga period, there is no reason why we should refrain from doing so in the Pāla or Sena period.

Actually, the problem lay in our changing perceptions, which have largely been transformed under the influence of puritanical assimilations of Christianity and Islam. Pre-Islamic and Pre-Christian Indian society and religion was known for its candidness and lack of inhibition. Eroticism to the Indians was just another of many more natural expressions of life. Love for them was an eternal form of bonding with life and its innumerable manifestations of living. Naturally, religion for them was not a bunch of extra-terrestrial codes of conduct, but

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a way of enjoying the harmony of being an integral part of this symbiosis. That is why the sculptures of an elderly man reading books to a young woman, and a matured lady teaching a young man the ways of love-making are placed side by side on the outer walls of the Khiching temple. To dismiss them as debauchery and perversion is only another way of saying no to life. Thankfully, our ancestors during these one thousand years and beyond had embraced life in its totality, instead of being indiscreetly selective.

Notes

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23. Rajanikanta Chakraborty, *Gouḍer Itihasa.* pp. (ed. Dr. M.S. Bhattacharyya).
24. S.K. Saraswati, *Pālajuger Citrakalā*, pp. 27.
25. N.K.Bhattashali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures,* pp. 74,109.
26. M.S.Bhattacharyya. *Art of Bengal,* Vol. I, pp. 23-26.
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THREE

THOSE IMMORTAL STRUCTURES

In this chapter we are going to give a brief description of the Hindu and Buddhist temples whose sculptures we have included in our present work. The descriptions have elements of History, Architecture, Iconography, and features of their aesthetic excellence in requisite detail.

The Sun Temple of Konarak

The Sun Temple of Konarak is a 13th-century structure and is popularly known as the Black Pagoda. It was constructed by King Narasiṁhadeva I in 1236-1264 AD. This monument is one of the most renowned temples in India and is a world heritage site. The temple takes the form of the chariot of Arka or Sūrya, the Sun god, and is heavily decorated with stone carvings. The entire complex was designed in the form of a huge chariot drawn by seven spirited horses on twelve pairs of exquisitely decorated wheels. The entrance is guarded by two giant lions, each shown crushing a war elephant. These elephants in turn lie on top of a human body. The temple symbolizes the majestic stride of the Sun god. At the entrance of the temple is a Nāṭa Mandir or amphitheatre. This is where the temple dancers used to perform dances in homage to the Sun god. All around the temple, there are various floral and geometric patterns. The temple is now partly in ruins, and a collection of its sculptures is housed in the Sun Temple Museum, which is run by the Archaeological Survey of India.

Majestic in conception, this temple is one of the most sublime monuments of India, famous as much for its imposing dimensions and flawless proportions. As for the harmonious integration of architectural grandeur with plastic elegance, every inch of the temple is covered with sculpture of an unsurpassed beauty and grace, in tableaux and freestanding pieces ranging from the monumental to the miniature. The subject matter is fascinating. Thousands of images include deities, celestial and human musicians, dancers, lovers, and myriad scenes of regal life, ranging from hunts and military battles to the pleasures of courtly relaxation. These are

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interspersed with countless figures of birds and animals of various descriptions. A wealth of intricate floral, faunal, and geometrical designs appears all through the structure. Elephants march around the base of the main temple along with mythological creatures. The famous jewel-like quality of Orissan art is evident throughout, lending a hypnotic beauty :

> The temple of Konarak is not an isolated monument standing on its own peculiarities. Gorgeously conceived as a colossal chariot drawn on twelve pairs of exquisite wheels by a team of seven richly-caparisoned horses in spirited gallops and symbolizing the sun god himself as if emerging from the depth of the blue expanse, the temple, of epic imagination and vastness, is the supreme realization, through ceaseless architectural experiments, of the creative upsurge that fired the architects of Orissa since the 7th century AD. It marked the peak of efflorescence of the entire Orissan architectural movement and was also the brightest flicker of a dying lamp[1].

As is well-known the Konarak temple is famous for its erotic sculptures, which can be found primarily on the second level of the porch structure. It will become immediately apparent upon viewing them that the frank nature of their content is combined with an overwhelming tenderness and lyrical movement. This same kindly and indulgent view of life extends to almost all the other sculptures at Konarak, where the thousands of human, animal, and divine personages are shown engaged in the full range of the 'carnival of life' with an overwhelming sense of appealing realism. Its fine traceries and scrollwork, as well as the beautiful and natural curves of animal and human figures, give it superiority over other temples. As Percy Brown[2] reminds us, the Sun temple belongs to the Kalinga School of Indian temples with characteristic curvilinear towers mounted by cupolas. In shape, the temple did not make any major departure from other *śikhara* temples of Orissa and in other parts of Southern India. The main sanctum which is 229 ft. high was constructed along with the audience hall, 128 ft. high, having elaborate external projections. Due to ravages of time the main sanctum which enshrined the presiding deity has fallen off. The Audience Hall survives in its entirety, but only small portions of the Dancing Hall or Nāṭamandir and the Dining Hall or *Bhoga-Maṇḍapa* have survived the vagaries of time. The Temple compound measures 857 ft by 540 ft. The alignment of the Sun Temple is on the east-west direction. The Temple is located in natural surroundings, abounding with casuarina plantations and other types of trees such as mahogany and rosewood, which grow on sandy soil.

The most popular theory about the root of the fall of Konarak temple rests with Kālāpāhāḍa, the general of Bengal Sultan Sulaiman Karnani. According to some accounts Kālāpāhāḍa was formerly a Hindu, namely Kālāchānd Bhāduri, who later converted to Islam. *Afsanah-i-Shahan* of Shaikh Kabir Batini, says that he was a Batini Afghan. According to the history of Orissa, Kālāpāhāḍa invaded Orissa in 1568. This date is corroborated by many sources like *Riāz-us Sālātin* of Ghulam Hussein Salim who mentions Kālāpāhāḍa as a general of Suleiman Karrani, the Sultan of Bengal who flourished in the second half of the sixteenth century. Legend has it that he destroyed Konarak temple, as well as a number of Hindu temples in Orissa. Reliable medieval sources like the *Madala Panji* of Puri Jagannath temple describes how Kālāpāhāḍa attacked Orissa in 1568. Including Konarak temple, he demolished

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numerous images in most of the Hindu temples in Orissa. Though the stone walls are of 20 to 25 feet thick, he somehow managed to displace the *Dadhinauti* or arch stone and thus caused the tower to collapse. He also damaged most of the images and other side temples of Konarak. Due to displacement of the *Dadhinauti*, the tower gradually collapsed and the roof of the *Mukasala* was also damaged, due to the stones falling down from the temple top. Further damage to the temple was caused by the bombardment of the Portuguese pirate ships some time later. However there is an interesting legend mentioned in some sources about how Kālāpāhāḍa became an iconoclast. These sources claim that the young Hindu general was courted by the daughter of the Sultan of Gauḍa (Bengal) and eventually forced to marry the young and beautiful princess. Some Hindu pundits enjoined that Kalachand should go for a *prāyaśchitta* or penance for marrying a Muslim woman. But the Brahmins of Bengal refused to help him in this regard. This rebuff had induced him to proceed to the holy temple of lord Jagannatha of Puri. But misfortune struck him at Puri also where the high priests rebuffed him. An irate Kālāpāhāḍa thereafter turned into a violent iconoclast who subsequently destroyed many temples and images of gods and goddesses.

Orissa came under Muslim control in 1568. There were constant attempts to destroy the Hindu temples. The pāṇḍās or priests of Puri, to save the sanctity of the Puri temple, took away the idol of Lord Jagannātha from the Śrīmandir and kept the image in a secret place. Similarly, it is said that the pāṇḍās of Konarak took away the presiding deity of the Sun temple and buried it under the sand for years. Latter on the image was said to have been removed to Puri and kept in the temple of Indra, in the compound of the Puri Jagannātha temple. According to others, the idol of Lord Jagannātha of Konarak temple is yet to be discovered. This resulted in the end of pilgrimages to Konarak. The port at Konarak was also closed, due to pirate attacks. Konarak was as glorious a city for Sun worship as it was for commercial activities, but after the cessation of these activities, Konarak became deserted and was left to develop as a dense forest for years.

In 1626 the king of Khurda, Narasiṁha Deva, son of Purusottama Deva, took away the Sun image to Puri along with two other deities - Sun and Moon. Now they are housed in a temple in the compound of Puri Jagannātha temple. As described earlier there was a big block of stone called Navagraha Paṭa placed in front of the *mukhasala*. The king of Khurda removed the block. The king had taken away many sculpted stones from Konarak and constructed some portions of Puri temple with them. During Maratha control over the port areas, the outer compound wall of the Puri temple was constructed of stones from Konarak temple. It is reported that among all the temples the Nāṭa Mandir or the Dancing hall of Konarak was in its original form for the longest period, and that it was broken intentionally since it was considered an unnecessary structure during the Maratha administration. In the year 1779, a Maratha *sādhu* had taken away the Arun Pillar from Konarak and put it in front of the Lion's Gate of Puri Jagannātha temple. Thus by the end of 18th century, Konarak lost all its glories and had turned

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to a dense forest. In course of time, the temple area thus became devoid of people, covered with dense forest, full of sand, filled with wild animals and became the abode of pirates. It is said that even the locals feared to go to Konarak in broad daylight.

The Khiching Temple

Khiching was the ancient capital of the Bhanja rulers, located about 205 km from Balasore and 150 km from Baripada in the Mayurbhanj district of north Orissa. It was in fact the center of art and architecture as the entire area has several exquisite temples and monuments mostly of the early medieval period. The architectural and sculptural ruins recovered from this site indicate that it must have been a major center of civilization around the 8th to 12th centuries AD. Very few sites in India can match the potential of Khiching as a center of art and architecture. The temples were as much known for the architectural splendor as they were for religious activities for centuries. The name Khiching is a corrupted version of Khijjiṇga or Khijjiṇga-koṭa, the capital of the early Bhanja rulers[3]. The ruins of the ancient glorious town can be seen from the boundaries of the present village from the bank of the Khairabandhan River in the north to the Kantakhair River in the south. Due to its geographic location and political role, it experienced varied cultural influences and liaisons. Such influences and liaisons contributed to the development of the art of Khiching that expressed the aesthetic and religious characteristic along with an individuality of its own.

According to legends, Khiching had a group of eight temples dedicated to Lord Śiva once upon a time. The liṅgams of the seven temples can be seen even now. Today, Khiching have three ancient temples dedicated to Kutaitundi, Candraśekhara and Kīcakeśvarī. The ruins of the forts of Viratgarh and Kichakagarh, few stūpas and several sculptures can also be seen at Khiching. The largest temple of the town is dedicated to Goddess Kīcakeśvarī, the family goddess of the ruling chiefs of Mayurbhanj[4]. The temple, made of black basalt, is architecturally brilliant and well carved from its outer surface. The original temple was built somewhere in the 7th or the 8th century AD and was reconstructed in the 12th century from the ruins of an earlier temple. The shrine contains a large ten-armed skeletal image of Cāmuṇḍā, a mātṛkā goddess, with striking veins, ribs and sunken belly, wearing a garland of skulls and seated over a dead body. The pārśvadevatās or attendant deities, the *caitya*, the figures of amorous couples, the scroll works and the arabesques can still be seen in the original portions of the temple. The style of the temple is contemporary of the Brahmeśvara and the Liṅgaraj temples of Bhubaneswar. The plinth and the walls of the temple of Candraśekhara stand intact in the compound. The *śikhara* is still in position while the *mastaka* portion had fallen off but has been restored. The ornamentations on the lintel, the doorjambs and the figures of *dvārapālas* or doorkeepers, Caṇḍa and Pracaṇḍa, are well executed.

The ruins of two fortified palaces of Khiching are worthy of visit. The largest fort is of Viratgarh on the river Khairabandhan. The Kichakagarh Fort is named after the well-known

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character in the Mahābhārata. They were probably the royal residences of the Bhanja rulers. The excavated site of Viratgarh has unearthed the brick remains along with a number of antiquities such as pottery, terracotta figurines, stone images, beads, pieces of gold and seals. The discovery of a Kuṣāṇa coin places the history of the region to the 2nd century AD. Caula Kunji has 14 pillars out of which 4 are large and 10 are small but all monoliths. This place is to the southwest of the present Khiching temple. These pillars were brought to this location somewhere in 1932. It is also known as the *nāṭya-mandir* and is in a dilapidated condition. The extensive ruins of Kichakagarh lie to the southwest of this site. A brick mound called Itamundia is situated to the southeast of the Kīcakeśvarī temple complex. This place has a massive image of the Buddha. One of the doorjambs contains an image of Mahiṣa-Mardinī, a form of goddess Caṇḍī. Candisal (a derivative of Caṇḍī) is an important place situated to the south of Itamundia. This place has been excavated and conserved. The most noteworthy discovery from this place is the carved bricks, which formed the wall of the main temple. An image of the Buddha enshrined in the lower part of the temple was found during the excavation. Two images of Umā-Maheśvara have been found from the Bhaibohu Dedhasura on the banks of the river Kantakhair. The doorjambs and the lintel of a temple in a fairly good condition were excavated from here. The latterite stone was used in the construction of the temple except in the jambs, lintel and *kalasa*. The Buddhist images in all probability are the remainder of some ancient Buddhist centers taken over by the followers of the Śakti cult. This is an interesting phenomenon of the socio-religious scenario of Eastern India when Buddhism was steadily declining yielding place to the Śakti and other cults. This is a relevant question since the Brahmanical pantheon, influenced by Tantricism, manifested eroticism in a more profound manner than any other faith. Both Konarak and Khiching vouch for this hypothesis. The Buddhist sculptures were accommodated in the Brahmanical temples so that the temples would not fail to attract the Buddhists, a sizable section of the population fast losing ground to the overwhelming influence of the major Brahmanical cults.

There is a museum at Khiching, which is housed in the temple compound. The museum has the life-size images of Durgā, Gaṇeśa, Pārśvanātha, Tārā, Pārvatī, Ardhanārisvara, Vaiśnavī, Nandī, Kārtikeya, Avalokiteśvara, Dhyānī Buddha, Mahiśāsuramardinī, Umā-Maheśvara and female devotees on display. The museum has exhibits like the copper and iron implements, terracotta figurines, seals, ornaments, potteries, coins, stone tools and various fragments of the temples. The courtyard of the museum has several sculpted parts of ancient temples on display in open. The monuments of Khiching represent one of the highest points of the Orissan sculptural tradition. It combined a highly original aesthetic sense with extraordinary craftsmanship. The temple and sculptures of the place are all found in blue fine-grained chlorite, which is more enduring in nature and conducive for receiving fine ornamentation. The iconographical evidences suggest that under the early Bhanja rulers, Khiching was a prosperous town where Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism existed side by side although with a varying degree of influence over the people.

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Liṅgarāja Temple

The Liṅgarāja Temple is a temple of the Hindu god Śiva and is one of the oldest temples of the Temple City Bhubaneswar, a revered pilgrimage center and the capital of the state of Orissa. The temple of Liṅgarāja, the biggest of all at Bhubaneswar is located within a spacious compound wall of latterite measuring 520 feet by 465 feet. The wall is 7 feet 6 inches thick and surmounted by a plain slant coping. Alongside the inner face of the boundary wall there runs a terrace probably meant to protect the compound wall against outside aggression. The temple of Lingaraja is by far the most notable monument of Bhubaneswar. Rising to a height of about one hundred and eighty feet and dominating the entire landscape it represents the quintessence of the Kaliṅga type of architecture and the culmination of the architectural tradition at Bhubaneswar.

Liṅgarāja means 'the king of Liṅgas', 'Liṅga' or 'Liṅgam' being the symbol of Lord Śiva worship. The temple is more than 1000 years old, dating back in its present form to the last decade of the eleventh century, though there is evidence that parts of the temple have been there since sixth century AD as the temple has been emphasized in some of the seventh century Sanskrit texts. This is testimony to its sanctity and importance as a Śiva shrine. By the time the Liṅgarāja temple was constructed, the Jagannāth a Vaiṣṇava cult had been growing, which historians believe is evidenced by the co-existence of Viṣṇu and Śiva worship at the temple[5]. As Percy Brown observes:

> The temple is traditionally believed, though without historical authentication, to be built by the Somavanshi king Jajati Keshari, in 11th century AD. Jajati Keshari had shifted his capital from Jajpur to Bhubaneswar which was referred to as Ekamra Kshetra in the Brahma Purana, an ancient scripture. The Lingaraj temple stands majestically as the largest temple in Bhubaneswar. At 55 meters high, it dominates the landscape with 150 smaller shrines in its spacious courtyard and is surrounded by massive walls lavishly decorated with beautiful sculptures.

This temple has actually four parts: the main temple, the yajña Śāla, the bhogamaṇḍapa and finally the nāṭyaśāla. This temple has images of both Śiva and Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu is actually represented as a Saligram. The Śiva idols are surrounding the Saligram. Even the temple spire has got no triśūla and even cakra, insinuating at the dual supremacy of gods. It has only Lord Rama's arrow symbol, probably because Lord Rama was a worshipper of Lord Śiva. The temple's main gates have images of Lord Śiva, triśūla on one side and Lord Viṣṇu's cakra on the other side.

This magnificent temple, dedicated to Śiva, represents the quintessence of the Kalinga type of Hindu architecture. Along with the Rājā-Rānī Temple, it is the pinnacle of the architectural exhibition at Bhubaneswar. It contains a profusion of sculptural work. It is built of red sandstone, which gives it a dark color. The massive granite block in the sanctum, the Svayambhū, is worshipped both as Śiva and Viṣṇu. The harmony of the two sects is seen in this temple where the deity is worshipped as Hari-Hara, a combined form of Viṣṇu and Śiva.

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The presiding deity is the Svayambhū Liṅga. The granite image of the Liṅga is said to be bathed daily with water, milk and *bhāng* (marijuana). Almost all the Hindu Gods and Goddesses are represented here, reflecting the innate element of harmony within the religion. Over and above it represents syncretism as one of the basic features of contemporary temple architecture which sought to undo rigid cult affiliation for the sake of general acceptance by the devotees.

The Liṅgarāja temple is dedicated to Tribhuvaneśvar or 'Lord of the Three Worlds' namely, Lord Viṣṇu and Lord Śiva, is embellished with splendid sculptures on its curvilinear walls with beautiful graphic specimens from the *Kāmasūtra*, including rancor and rampage. Many of the life-size chlorite stone effigies of gods are dismantled with the passage time but still attest the sculptors' extraordinary skills. In the north-east corner of the temple, a smaller shrine of Pārvatī is of particular interest. Often called as 'a hollow pyramid composed of several superimposed chambers', this temple surely glorifies Kaliṅga School of architecture which left its impression for so many centuries on the sands of time. Built in the early 11th century Nāgara style, it is hailed by archaeologists as the most important temple in Orissa. The temple was built by Lalātendu Keśarī of Somavamsī dynasty when Jagannātha cult at Puri was at its peak, which is elucidated from the fact that the presiding deity Lord Tribhuvaneśvar here is half Viṣṇu and half Śiva. There are more than 100 shrines nestled within the temple courtyard which clearly defines the harmony that existed between different sects present at that time[6].

The Liṅgarāja temple is divided into four distinct chambers interconnected to each other; the external part (*jagamohana*), the inner sanctum sanctorum (*garbhagṛha*), and a conical beehive shaped tower forming the third part (*nāṭyamaṇḍapa* and the *bhogamaṇḍapa*). The temple complex has a planned drainage system and is marvelously designed to keep monsoon rains off the walls. According to ancient scriptures, the *jagamohana* and *garbhagṛha* were made in the 7th century B.C, whereas the third part was later added to the main shrine. The fact is endorsed by the use of completely different types of sandstones and the architectural style followed, which relates to a much later period of history. The *garbhagṛha* is a square structure, circled in clustered bands that vertically bend inward to give a tapering profile. The *nāṭyamaṇḍapa* was used by the *devadāsis* or temple dancers whereas the *bhogamaṇḍapa* (hall of offering) was for rites, rituals and recitation of hymns.

The spacious temple compound of latterite is about 150 meters square with a *deul* (tower) 55 meter high. The ornately carved tower is intricately sculpted with turrets inserted on the ribs of the spire. On the northern side of the temple, close to the wall, is a viewing platform, 20 feet high, originally erected for Lord Curzon, the viceroy during the first decade of the twentieth century and had no connection with the original building. The platform provides an enthralling view of the shrine and one can easily spot lions and elephants (*gaja* and *siṁha*)

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among the most popular motifs of Indian art and many other exotic sculptures embellish the spire. The deity is offered a bath during sunrise, followed by decorating the Liṅgam with garlands made of beautiful flowers and applying sandalwood to it. The *ārati* is performed thereafter and offerings are made by scores of pilgrims carrying flowers, sweets and coconuts. The *mahāprasāda* or Holy food is distributed thereafter. The whole ambiance of faith and the aura that the pilgrims carry along with themselves surely takes everyone to a different spiritual dimension. Bindusagara or "Ocean Drop" is a tank placed north of the Liṅgarāja temple and is said to contain holy water from every river, lake and stream of India brought by Lord Śiva. Pilgrims from all over the country visit here to take a holy dip, with the faith that it will cure any disease due to the medicinal value of the water stored. A famous pilgrimage site for Hindus, the tank is surrounded by numerous temples and shrines. Interestingly enough, the structure of this temple as well as many other temples in Orissa have identical structural planning and finish. Whether with the Jagaṇṇātha temple, or the Khiching temple, all bear almost the same layout, foundation, use of construction material and only minor variations in the theme.

The Jagannātha Temple

The Jagannātha Temple in Puri is a famous Hindu temple dedicated to Jagannātha (Kṛṣṇa) and located in the coastal town of Puri in the state of Orissa. The name Jagannātha meaning Lord of the Universe, is a combination of the Sanskrit words *Jagat* (Universe) and *Nātha* (Lord). The temple is an important pilgrimage destination for many Hindu traditions, particularly worshippers of Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu. The temple is famous for its annual *Ratha Yātrā*, or Chariot Festival, in which the three main temple deities are hauled on huge and elaborately decorated chariot. Since medieval times, it is also associated with intense religious fervor. The temple is sacred to the Vaiṣṇava traditions and saint Rāmānanda who was closely associated with the temple. It is also of particular significance to the followers of the *Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇavism* whose founder, Caitanya Mahāprabhu, born in Nabadwip in Bengal was attracted to the deity, Jagannaṭha, and lived in Puri for many years before his mysterious death.

According to recently discovered copper plates of the Gaṅga dynasty the construction of the current Jagannātha temple was initiated by the ruler of Kaliṅga, Anantavarman Choḍagaṅga Deva[7]. The *jagamohana* and the *vimāna* portions of the temple were built during his reign (1078 - 1148 AD). However it was only in the year 1174 AD that the Orissan ruler *Anaṅga Bhima Deva* rebuilt the temple to give a shape in which it stands today. Jagannātha worship in the temple continued until 1558, when Orissa was attacked by the Afghan general of the sultan of Bengal, namely Kālāpāhāḍa. Subsequently, when Rāmachandra Deb established an independent kingdom at Khurda in Orissa, the temple was consecrated and the deities reinstalled.

The traditional story concerning the origins of the temple is that the original image of Jagannātha (arguably a form of Kṛṣṇa) was found near a fig tree in the form of an Indranīlā or

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the Blue Jewel. It was so dazzling that Dharma wanted to hide it in the earth. King Indradyumna of Malwa wanted to find the image and to do so he performed harsh penances to obtain his goal. Viṣṇu then instructed him to go to the Puri seashore and find a floating log to make an image from its trunk. The King found the log of wood. The god Viśvakarmā appeared in the form of an artist and prepared images of Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma and Subhadrā from the tree.

The huge temple complex covers an area of over 400,000 square feet (37,000 m²), and is surrounded by a high fortified wall. It contains at least 120 temples with its sculptural richness and fluidity of the Odissi style of temple architecture; it is one of the most magnificent monuments of India. The main temple is a curvilinear one and crowning the top is the *Srīcakra* (an eight spoke wheel) of Viṣṇu. Also known as the *Nilacakra*, it is made out of *aśṭadhātu*, an alloy of eight metals, and is considered sacrosanct. The temple tower was built on a raised platform of stone and, rising to 214 feet (65 m) above the inner sanctum where the deities reside, dominates the surrounding landscape. The pyramidal roofs of the surrounding temples and adjoining halls, or *maṇḍapas*, rise in steps toward the tower like a ridge of mountain peaks. The main shrine is enclosed by a 20 feet (6.1 m) high wall. Another wall surrounds the main temple.

The *siṁhadvāra*, which in Sanskrit means the Lion Gate, is one of the four gates to the temple and forms the Main entrance. The *siṁhdvāra* is so named because two huge statues of crouching lions exist on either side of the entrance. The gate faces east opening on to the *Bada Danda* or the Grand Road. The *Baisi Pahacha* or the flight of twenty two steps leads into the temple complex. An idol of Jagannātha known as *Patita Pāvana*, which in Sanskrit, means the "Savior of the downtrodden and the fallen" is painted on the right side of the entrance. In ancient times when untouchables were not allowed inside the temple, they could pray to Patita Pāvana. The statues of the two guards to the temple Jaya and Vijaya stand on either side of the doorway. Just before the commencement of the *Ratha Yātra* the idols of Jagannātha, Balabhadra and Subhadrā are taken out of the temple through this gate. On their return from the Gundicha Temple the other festivals like *Dola Yātra* and *Jhula Yātra* are celebrated by devotees every year. Only then the Goddess allows them permission to enter the temple. A magnificent sixteen-sided monolithic pillar known as the Aruṇa Stambha stands in front of the main gate. This pillar has an idol of Aruṇa, the charioteer of the Sun God Sūrya, on its top. The pillar originally installed in the Sun temple of Konarak was shifted to Puri.

Apart from the *siṁhdvāra*, which is the main entrance to the temple, there are three other entrances facing north, south and west. They are named after the sculptures of animals guarding them. The other entrances are the *hāthidvāra* or the Elephant Gate, the *vyāghradvāra* or the Tiger Gate and the *aśvadvāra* or the Horse Gate. There are many *maṇḍapas* or Pillared halls on raised platforms within the temple complex meant for religious congregations. The most prominent is the *muktimaṇḍapa* the congregation hall of the *sevayats* or the temple servitors. Here important decisions regarding conduct of daily worship and festivals are taken.

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The *dolamaṇḍapa* is noteworthy for a beautifully carved stone *toraṇa* or arch which is used for constructing a swing for the annual Dola Yātra festival. During the festival the idol of Dolagovinda is placed on the swing. The *snanā vedi* is a rectangular stone platform where the idols of Jagannātha, Balabhadra and Subhadrā are placed for ceremonial bathing during the annual *Snāna Yātra.*

The central forms of gods Jagannātha,and Balabhadra and the goddess Subhadrā constitute the trinity of deities sitting on the bejeweled platform or the *ratnavedī* in the inner sanctum. The Sudarśana Cakra, idols of Madanmohana and Visvadhātrī are also placed on the *ratnavedī*. The idols of Jagannātha, Balabhadra, Subhadrā and Sudarśan Cakra are made from sacred Neem logs known as Dāru Bramha .Depending on the season the deities are adorned in different garbs. Worship of the deities pre-date the temple structure and may have originated in an ancient tribal shrine.

There are numerous smaller temples and shrines within the Temple complex where active worship is regularly conducted. The temple of Mahālakṣmī has an important role in the rituals of the main temple. It is said that preparation of food as offering for Jagannātha is supervised by Goddess Mahālakṣmī. The Kānchi Gaṇeśa Temple is dedicated to Gaṇeśa. Tradition maintains that the idol of Gaṇeśa was brought from Knchipuram in present day Tamil Nadu by the legendary King Purusottama after he defeated the King of Kanchipuram and incorporated the town into his kingdom in ancient times.

The temple's kitchen is considered as the largest kitchen in India. It is said that if the food prepared has any fault in it a dog appears near the temple kitchen. The temple cooks take this as a sign of displeasure of Mahālakṣmī with the food which is promptly buried and a new batch cooked. All food is cooked following rules as prescribed by Hindu religious texts. Cooking is done only in earthen pots with water drawn from two special wells near the kitchen called Gaṅgā and Jamunā. The food after being offered to Jagannātha is distributed as *mahāprasāda* to the devotees in the Ānanda Bāzār located to the North of the *siṁhadvāra* inside the temple complex.

Jajpur

Jajpur is a small town in Orissa, located about 200 km northwest of Bhuvaneshwar. Situated on the banks of the sacred Vaitaraṇī River, it is one of the oldest and holiest places of Orissa. It was effectively the political epicenter of ancient Utkala for some time. It is a renowned centre of Tantricism as well as of other religious cults like Śaktism, Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, and of course Jainism and Buddhism. It is also called a temple town or Jajñapura[8], from which perhaps the present name of Jajpur has been derived.

Jajpur was introduced to Vaiṣṇavism after Samudragupta's Utkal and Kalinga campaign in the 4th Century AD. The Garuḍa pillar at Madhapur in the *jagamohana* of Garuḍa

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temple stands as a clear testimony of the Gupta influence in art architecture and religion. Needless to say, that this was a deviation from the strong Buddhist and Jaina influence that this region experienced for the earlier period. It is believed that some of the temples had their foundations laid as early as in the Gupta period. In terms of antiquity as well as architectural splendor they are just magnificent. In years to come, Jajpur became a great centre of art and sculpture spreading from the ancient to the early mediaeval period.

According the Hindu mythology, the legend of Sati's death and the subsequent fragmentation of her corpse by Viṣṇu's *sudarśana cakra* was the origin of the Śakti pīthas in many places in India. Jajpur is considered one such *pītha* where Śati's navel fell[9]. This *pītha*, like the rest was a center of Tantricism for a pretty long time. But it came to be the source of the rise of *Varāha-Vaiṣṇavism* in the Gupta period. There are even today an abundance of Viṣṇu images either in the Varāha form or otherwise all around the Virajādevī Temple. Later during the 5th-6th century AD Mahārājā Bhānudutta went on to issue coins from Virajā, followed by the Śailodbhava rulers in 6th-7th century AD and the Bhaumakaras in the 8th-9th century AD when it virtually became the capital of Orissa. But then the Bhaumakaras were ardent Śaivites and therefore the Vaiṣṇava influence of Jajpur eroded and made room for Śaivism. It was during this period that the temple also got the Śākta images. Sculptures of Mahiṣamardinī, Cāmuṇḍa, Annapurṇā, Kālī, and even Cinnamastā feature prominently in the inner walls and the other areas of the temple compound.

Goddess Virajā symbolizes the strength and vigour of a lion. It is believed that Yayāti Keśarī built the original temple which was later developed by his son Yayāti II. But the most interesting fact is that Yayāti Keśarī was a devout Śaiva. He had already set up a number of Śaiva temples in different parts of Jajpur. How then he suddenly turned to be a devout Śākta, a worshipper of the Śakti cult is a mystery. What were the exact circumstances that contributed to his sudden tilt is still not known to us. There are no chronicles or historical records that might have shed some light into the change is not available. What we do observe is the recognition of Śaktism and Tantrism as the two state religions during the reign of Yayāti Keśarī, leading to the construction of a number of *śaktipīthas* under his patronage. It is here at these *śaktipīthas* that we come across a number of small and big sculptures of Umā-Maheśvara, Ardhanārīśvara, Cāmuṇḍā, Bhairava, Kārtikeyī, Mahiṣāsuramardinī, and the like. One such temple which houses as many as eight deities is the Aṣta-Mātṛkā Temple. Located on the banks of the sacred Brāhmaṇī river it houses eight deities of the Śakti cult including Vārāhī, Cāmuṇḍā, Narasiṁhī, Maheśvarī, Indrānī, Kaumārī, Brāhmaṇī, and Danturā, and is known as one of the most renowned *śaktipīthas* of Orissa. Very close to this temple stand the Jagannātha Temple or the Viṣṇu Temple. This temple compound is literally dotted with not just sculptures of popular Vaiṣṇava deities, but also the popular Śaiva-Śaktī deities.

An interesting feature of many temple towns in India is the co-existence of several cults in one temple complex. Reasons are however not far to seek. The trend was not as old as we

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think them to be. It was a pragmatic response to the challenge of the alien faiths. The medieval cult leaders could realize the danger of extinction in the event of isolation and even state sponsored challenges from the new alien faith. So various Indian cults, particularly the larger ones like Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, etc. sought to forge an alliance between themselves. Such efforts did go on to include the Buddhists and the Jainas in the later stages. In order to display this close affinity and religious co-operation, the temples would have a main or principal deity to whom the temple would be dedicated or named after. But it would be liberally sprinkled with deities of Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Śākta sects. It is argued that it is from this forged alliance that the idea of a united Hindu front actually evolved during the Islamic rule. In fact the Hindu society that we notice in the colonial era evolved around this time only.

But there is another theory to this aspect. Some historians argue that many of these Hindu temples were constructed after capturing some of the prominent Buddhist and Jaina temples partly because of utilizing the existing temple infrastructure in that particular spot. Partly, this was to take advantage of the prominent place and public knowledge of that place. But the fact remains that due to the co-existence there evolved a number of new and reformed deities. As far as Jajpur is concerned, the rise of the new dynastic clan, the Gaṅgas in Orissa and their setting up of power centres in Cuttack and Bhuvaneshwar region gradually brought down the curtains on Jajpur. However despite the devastations of Sulaiman Karnani and his iconoclasts, some of the temples with their exquisite sculptures still survived to leave one of the glorious phases of Eastern Indian plastic art and architecture.

Kāmākṣyā

Kāmākṣyā is an important Tāntric mother goddess closely identified with Kālī and Mahātripurāsundarī, according to the Tāntric texts (*Kalikāpurāṇa*, *Yoginitantram*) that are the basis for her worship at the Kāmākṣyā temple in Assam. Her name means "renowned goddess of desire," and she resides at the Kāmākṣyā temple in the form of a stone *yoni* or female genital.

The 16th century Kāmākṣyā temple is in the Kamrup district of Assam. This temple is primary amongst the 51 *Śakti Pīthas* related to the myth of Satī, and remains one of the most important Śākta temples and Hindu pilgrimage sites in the entire Eastern India. Naranārāyaṇa, a sixteenth century king of Coochbehar built the present shrine.

One of the most persistent legends[10] concerning the origin of worship at the site is associated with the myth of Śatī, who was the wife of the ascetic god Śiva and daughter of the Purāṇic god-king Dakṣa. Dakṣa was unhappy with his daughter's choice of husband, and when he performed a grand Vedic sacrifice for all the deities, he did not invite Śiva or Śatī. In a rage, Śatī threw herself onto the fire, knowing that this would make the sacrifice impure. Because she was the all-powerful mother goddess, Śatī left her body in that moment to be reborn as the goddess Pārvatī. Meanwhile, Śiva was stricken with grief and rage at the loss of

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his wife. He put Śatī's body over his shoulder and began his *tāṇḍava* (dance of cosmic destruction) throughout the heavens, and vowed not to stop until the body was completely rotted away. The other Gods, afraid of their annihilation, implored Viṣṇu to pacify Śiva. Thus, wherever Śiva wandered while dancing, Viṣṇu followed. He dared not come close to the terrible Śiva, so he sent his discus *sudarśanacakra* to destroy the corpse of Śatī. Pieces of her body fell until Śiva was left without a body to carry. Seeing this, Śiva sat down to do *mahātapasya*. Despite the similarity in name, scholars do not generally believe that this legend gave rise to the practice of *Sati*, or widow burning. According to various myths and traditions, there are 51 pieces of Śatī's body scattered across the Indian subcontinent. Some text and legends mention a greater number of *pīthas*. These places are called *śaktīpīthas* and are dedicated to various powerful forms of the goddess. Kamarupa ("form of desire") is the region in which the *yoni* ("vulva," "womb," or "source") is said to have fallen to earth, and the Kāmākṣyā temple was said to have been constructed on this spot.

Kāmākṣyā as a goddess very likely predates the Sanskritization of Assam. She might owe her origin to an important goddess of the Khasi, a tribe from Northeast India, Meghalaya to be specific, that retains matriarchal social systems and female dominance. The goddess *Kā-me-khā* was likely Sanskritized and Brahmanized to *Kāmākṣyā*. This origin may survive in local Assamese pronunciation of the goddess's name, which sounds similar to "Kā-mā-khā."

Kāmākṣyā is mentioned in the *Kālikā Purāṇa* as the most important goddess of Tantric worship, and is referred to in the text as *Mahāmāyā*, the "great goddess of illusion," who takes on many forms depending on her mood[11]. Devotees also call her Kāmeśvarī (beloved goddess of desire), and consider her a form of Mahā tripurā sundariī, also called Soḍaṣī. She

identified with Kalī in the *Kālikā Purāṇa, Yoginītantra and Kāmākṣya Tantra*. Kāmākṣyā is associated with the Daśa Mahāvidyās, who each have temples dedicated to them at the Kāmākṣyā temple complex in Assam. She is also closely associated with Durgā. Mantras for general worship of the Mahāvidyās at the Kāmākṣyā temple complex reveal a close relation with Kāmākṣyā herself. Several of these goddesses are worshipped as forms of Kāmākṣyā explicitly. Kāmākṣyā is depicted as a young goddess, 16 years old, with twelve arms and six heads, representing a powerful goddess who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. She is ornately dressed, typically wearing a *red* sāri, opulent jewelry and red flowers such as hibiscus. She holds in each of ten hands a lotus, trident, sword, bell, discus, bow, arrow, club or scepter, goad, and shield. Her remaining two hands hold a bowl, which is made either of gold or a human skull. She is seated upon a lotus, which emerges from the navel of the corpse of Śiva, who in turn lies atop a lion. To each side of her sit Brahmā and Viṣṇu, who are each seated upon a lotus, as well. This depiction again reminds one of the trends of syncretism.

Kāmākṣyā is often synonymous with *Śākta Tantra*. Tantric worship of Kāmākṣyā is very secretive in nature[12]. Tantric texts such as the 10th century *Kālikā Purāṇa* and 15th

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the *vāmacara,* or "left-hand path," which includes the use of forbidden substances (such as *pañcamakāra*) and practices designed to transcend desire and personal ego. Features of Tantric worship may include the drawing of a *yantra* with *sindoor* (vermillion) and repeating the *bīja mantra* associated with her. However, common worship of this goddess is fairly orthodox in nature. The *Kālikā Purāṇa* states that all worship is acceptable to the goddess, and that one should worship her according to one's own customs. Worship of Kāmākṣyā grants *mokṣa,* or ultimate spiritual liberation.

Darśan at this temple is performed not by sight as in most temples, but by touch. There is no *mūrti*, but rather a large cleft in the bedrock moistened by water flowing upward from an underground spring, generally covered by cloths and ornate *chunris*, flowers, and red *sindoor* (vermillion) powder. Devotees and pilgrims offer items for worship directly to the goddess, then touch her and drink water from the spring. They are then given a *tilaka* and *prasāda* by the attending priest.

Temples of Unokoti and Devtāmurā

Tripura has a long historic past, a unique tribal culture and a fascinating folklore. The history of Tripura can be understood from *Rājamālā* chronicles of kings Tripura and writings of some Mohammedan historians[13]. There are references of Tripura even in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*. Tripura is a predominantly hilly state having a geographical area which is of undulating terrain, largely mountainous. Like all tribal cultures, who acknowledge the presence of a supreme being, an omnipotent, whom they worship with animal sacrifices, the tribes of Tripura were no exception. But they also believed in Amam-Paro or hundred gods whom they offered hundred shares of rice, betel-nut, and liquor. The hills, the thick forests, wild animals, rivers, boulders, and the huge uncertainties that was an integral part of tribal life, made the people of Tripura evolve a religious practice that was in tandem with the ecology and environment, and at the same time relied on the powers of the omnipotent who governed their day-to-day life. They also worshipped their ancestors. But interestingly enough, the images of these deities or ancestors were not housed in any temples. They were carved out on rocks in the wilderness. This was perhaps how the sculptures of Devtamura and Unokoti came into existence[14].

There is a difference of opinion as to why these sculptures of gods and goddesses were so oversized as to be kept in the open instead of curving them smaller and housing them in decorative temples as was the custom in the plains. One opinion is that there was paucity of skilled masons and architects who would have designed and built these temples, which may be refuted very easily. Because, the sculptors who could curve out such beautiful figures were almost certainly, as it always happened in Samataṭa, was always in close collusion with the masons and constructing a matching temple was not an issue. Lack of finances to support such elaborate constructional activity could have been a factor. But let us not forget that Indians

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along with the building of magnificent temples have also the tradition of building oversized monolithic sculptures like the Buddha of Bamiyan or Bhadravahu Srutakevali of Sravanabelgola.

That the area being poor and underdeveloped in terms of trade and merchandise, lacked large business houses and affluent monarchy to sponsor such expensive constructions, is also not correct, as being an integral part of the Samataṭa region Tripura was quite well placed in the traditional trade routes. In fact the octo-alloy image of Sarvāṇī (a form of Durgā), gilt with leaves of gold, measuring as big as 51cms, was installed by queen Pravavātī of the Khaḍga dynasty as early as the 7th century. So leaving those wonderful sculptures in the wilderness was definitely not by compulsion, rather by choice which in fact enhances their beauty.

Again the theory that this was done deliberately as an act of camouflage against possible attempts of desecration by infidels also seems untenable. There appears to be some substance in this argument considering the time of creation of these sculptures — ranging from 9th century to 14th century. But the choice of location was more on the priorities of aesthetics rather than the intentions of camouflaging even though both the Brahmanical and Buddhist sculptures were under severe attack from Turko-Afgan invaders[15] only after the 12th century. Indeed, it is for sure that the wilderness enhances the aesthetic qualities of the sculptures and makes them one of the most remarkable set of plastic art in the entire eastern region.

It was as early as the beginning of the Christian era that Tripura, like many other tribal regions came under the influence of Hinduism. The Hindu gods like Śiva, Viṣṇu, Maheśvar, Kālī, Pārvatī came to be worshipped by the people of Tripura as it formed part and parcel of ancient Samataṭa region. However, many of these popular deities intermingled with their tribal entities like, Khetradeo, Jātrādeo, Bāndardeo, whose images were carved on the giant rocks much later. Amidst the sombre surroundings and breathtaking natural beauty these sculptures put up an impressive display of religious belief. It certainly took, may be even over one or two centuries to complete these magnificent sculptures[16]. Although most of the sculptures are in bust and are singular in entity without depicting any mythological ideas, they nevertheless express a deep sensuality in their overall disposition and artistic qualities. This sensuality is further heightened by their natural backdrop and rich Paleolithic settings.

In terms of their theme and mythological disposition Unokoti and Devtamura might not be among the contemporary Indian plastic art genre, but by virtue of the uniqueness of its approach and natural layout, it stands out as a remarkable set of sculptures. There is no doubt that it has succeeded in creating its own special place among the rich cultural heritage of eastern India.

The Stūpas of Paharpur (Somapur Mahāvihāra)

Paharpur is a small village 6 km. west of Jamalganj in the greater Rajshahi district of Bangladesh where the remains of the most important and the largest known monastery south of the Himalayas has been excavated. This great archaeological find covers approximately an

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area of 27 acres of land and is considered to be the biggest single *vihāra* in the sub-continent. It is actually six to seven kilometers to the west of Jamalganj railway station. The ruins of a temple of goddess Tārā have been discovered here. The numerous terracotta plaques decorating the walls of the main temple in row upon rows give a panoramic view of the everyday life of common people. Most of the plaques are to be dated not beyond 8th century AD. Although much smaller in size and expanse, the plaques of Mainamati, in Coomilla, Bangladesh, are close in stylistic affinity to what has been depicted in Paharpur[17].

An entire establishment, occupying a quadrangular court, measuring more than 900 ft. externally on each side, has high enclosure-walls about 16 ft. in thickness and from 12 ft. to 15 ft. height. With elaborate gateway complex on the north, there are 45 cells on the north and 44 in each of the other three sides with a total number of 177 rooms. The architecture of the pyramidal cruciform temple is profoundly reminiscent of those of South-East Asia, especially Myanmar and Java and very clearly establishes that Eastern India or *Prācya* had much to do in shaping the art and architecture of South-east Asia. Of the scores of sculptures that have so far been un-earthed from the ruins of Paharpur there are clear signs of Gupta influence from the beginning of 6th century AD to the middle of 8th century AD. From 8th century AD there appears a clear shift from stone to terracotta art forms. All these sculptures give glimpses of not only the dress, coiffure, and ornaments of women, but also of the religious beliefs and relation between Brahmanical and Buddhist religions. Some stone and bronze deities have also been discovered in Paharpur.

A small site-museum built in 1956-57 houses the representative collection of objects recovered from the area. Authorities also restored 177 monastic cells, the elaborate gateways, especially the one in the north, cleared the choked drains, and tightened the wall tops. The foundation of the entire building is huge and elaborate. The foundation outer-walls also have terracotta structures all over it. The actual building of bricks has however been destroyed and it is difficult to make any guesswork of the possible structure on the foundation. There stands a sprawling central courtyard around which is a pathway or *parikrama*. Thereafter there are as many as three temples or at least the structure seems to suggest so. And there are two large and impressive gates on the northern and western entrances. The excavated findings have also been preserved at the Varendra Research Museum at Rajshahi (Rajshahi Museum). The antiquities of the museum include terracotta plaques, images of different gods and goddesses, potteries, coins, inscriptions, ornamental bricks and other minor clay objects.

The Paharpur monastery dates from the 8th century AD. It was declared a protected archaeological site back in 1919. The scholar-traveller Dr. Francis Buchanan Hamilton had shown interest in it as far back as 1807. The name of the site has changed over the years. It began life as Somapura (abode of the moon), then became Mahāvihāra (great monastery) before taking its combination name. Getting to Paharpur is a bit of a pain on public transport, but it all adds to the element of discovery.

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One of the most striking features of Paharpur is the geometric shapes that have been used in its construction. The plot is a perfect square. So are the buildings that are inside the campus. Another striking feature is the wide range of Bramhanical gods and goddesses like Śiva, Pārvatī, Saraśvatī, and Kārtikeya, that have been found here despite the fact that Paharpur was primarily and essentially a Mahāyāna Buddhist centre and quite a prominent one. In fact several images of Śiva and Pārvatī in various postures have been unearthed. Not only that, the finding of the Manasā image is another notable feature, reflective of the very popular snake cult in these parts of Eastern India.

The caves of Udayagiri-Khandagiri

About 7-8 km from Bhubaneswar, Orissa, is well known for the ancient caves located in the twin cities of Udaygiri (meaning the hill of the sunrise) and Khandagiri (meaning the broken hill). Udaygiri caves are approximately 135 ft high and Khandagiri caves are 118 ft high. The caves are reminiscent of influence of Buddhism and Jainism in Orissa. The origin of the rock cut caves of Udaygiri and Khandagiri dates back to the 2nd century BC. The main attraction of these caves consists of its stupendous carvings. Of all the caves in Udaygiri, the largest one is the Rani Gumpha or the Queen's Cave. The cave of the queen is adorned beautifully. There is also an Elephant Cave or the Hathi Gumpha, where you can find the amazing statues of elephants installed on the gate. In the Khandagiri city, one can find a large number of caves and most of them have been occupied for meditative purposes. Some of the important caves in Khandagiri include Akshay Ganga, Gupta Ganga, Shyam Kund and Radha Kund. One of the most interesting caves is the 24-Tirthankaras Cave. It contains the carvings of the twenty-four Apostles of Jainism, on the monolithic stones. There is another fascinating cave known as the 'Ganesh Cave'. There are altogether 18 caves in Udaygiri hill and 17 caves in Khandagiri hill. These caves were excavated by King Kharavela and his successors in the early centuries of the Christian era. Most of the caves consist of a row of cells with portico and a courtyard. The cells have pilaster on either side with crowning animal figures and arches over them. These are decorated with flowers, creepers and animal motifs.

Stūpas of Ratnagiri

Ratnagiri in District Jajpur in Orissa is located at a distance of about 70 km from Cuttack. Extensive excavations conducted at the site brought to light remains of a magnificent Buddhist settlement consisting of *stūpas*, monastic complexes and temples hitherto unparalleled in Orissa and comparable to the well known Buddhist site of Nalanda. The place has been identified as Ratnagiri monastery on the basis of seals containing the legend "*Śrī Ratnagiri Mahāvihārīya āryabhikṣu saṁghasya*".

It has been established from the available evidence that constructional activities started at the site as early as the 5th century AD. This continued till the 12th century AD. Two other Buddhist sites, namely Lalitagiri and Udaigiri are in close vicinity. Recent excavations have

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brought to light remains of a large monastic complex, measuring 35 m square, a modest brick *stūpa*, a good number of unique sculptures of the Buddha and other Buddhist divinities. The site was known as Mādhavapur Mahāvihāra in its heyday as evident from seals recovered from the excavations. Recent excavations here have revealed a *stūpa* on the hill-top, four monasteries, a caityagṛha, numerous sculptures of Buddha and some Mahāyāna divinities, myriads of votive *stūpas*, inscriptions, antiquities and other art objects. Lalitagiri is the only site in Orissa where the finding of a relic casket was reported. The excavations show that the cultural sequence of Lalitagiri ranged from the post Mauryan (2nd century BC) to the medieval times in an unbroken sequence.

Nālandā Monastry

Nalanda was a great center of Buddhist learning in ancient times. A large number of Buddhist students thronged the Nalanda University to study Buddhism and several other subjects. According to the Chinese traveler Xuan Tzang the place owed its name to a Nāga, who resided in a local tank. Legend has it that Vardhamāna Mahāvīra and Buddha visited Nalanda quite frequently in the 6th century BC. It is also supposed to be the birth place of Sāriputra, one of the chief followers of the Buddha. The Nalanda University attracted large number of Buddhist students from different parts of the world. Arguably the University of Nalanda was founded in the 5th century by the Gupta rulers. There were thousands of students and teachers. The main courses which were taught there were the Buddhist scriptures (both Mahāyāna and Hinayāna), Vedās, Logic, *Śabda Vidyā* (grammar), *Cikitsā vidyā* (medicine, astronomy) etc. The Nalanda University received patronage of the great emperor, Harṣavardhana of Kannauj and the mighty Pāla emperors of Bengal and Bihar. The famous Chinese pilgrims, Xuang Zang and Yi Jing were among the distinguished students of the Nalanda University. Xuang Zang received here the Indian name Mokṣadeva. The importance of Nalanda University as a monastic university continued until the end of the 12th century.

> It is evident from the account of Hiuen-Tsang that Buddhism was slowly decaying when he visited India. Important centres of early Buddhism were deserted, though some new centres, such as Nalanda in the east, Valabhī in the west, and Kānchī in the south, had sprung up. After some time Buddhism lost its hold in other provinces and flourished only in Bihar and Bengal, where royal patronage succeeded in keeping alive a dying cause. But it is clear that Buddhism was no longer much popular and centred around a few monasteries. The Buddhism that was pratcised in these places was no longer of the simple Hinayāna type, nor even had much in common with the Mahāyāna of the earlier days, but was strongly imbued with ideas of Tantricism, inculcating belief in the efficacy of charms and spells and evolving secret practices and rituals[18].

The ruins of the Nalanda University extend over a large area. Excavations at Nalanda have uncovered nine levels of occupation. In ancient days, for revenue purposes, a large number of villages were assigned to the Nalanda University. The Nalanda University complex had a great *stūpa*. The excavations show that this *stūpa* is flanked by flights of steps and terraces.

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Many of the stupas were two or even three times built one over the other on the same spot. In the course of excavation it has been found that the very small original structure was enlarged by later temples built over and around the ruins of the earlier ones. The main *stūpa* at Nalanda is the result of seven successive accumulations. The main *stūpa* at Nalanda apparently contained a massive image of Lord Buddha [19].

In the Nalanda University complex a row of monastery sites lies from south to north. Almost all of them have the same pattern. The monasteries consisted of a number of monk's cells with wide verandas in front, initially set round an open quadrangular court, but later separated from it by a high wall. It was originally a building of two or probably more storey as the existence of stairs in the south-east corner shows. In the courtyard of monasteries, there used to be Lord Buddha's shrine and a well [20].

Excavation work has taken place over 14 hectares. All the structures are of red brick with beautiful gardens. In the complex, the buildings are divided by a central walkway that goes south to north, the monasteries or *vihāras* are located to the east of this central passage and the temples or *caityas* to the west.

Vikramaśīla Mahāvihāra

Vikramaśīla University was one of the most important centers of Buddhist learning in India during the Pāla rule, along with Nalanda University. Vikramaśīla was established by emperor Dharmapāla (AD 783 to 820) in response to a supposed decline in the quality of scholarship at Nalanda. Atiśa, the renowned *paṇḍita*, is always listed as a notable abbot of the monastery. Vikramaśīla (village Antichak, district Bhagalpur, Bihar) is located at about 50 km east of Bhagalpur and about 13 km north-east of Kahalgaon, a railway station on Bhagalpur Sahebganj section of Eastern Railway. It is approachable through 11 km long motorable road diverting from N.H.80 at Anadipur about 2 km from Kahalgaon. A number of monasteries grew up during the Pāla period in ancient Bengal and Magadha. According to Tibetan sources, five great Mahāvihāras stood out : Vikramaśīla, the premier university of the era; Nalanda, past its prime but still illustrious, Somapura, Odantapura, and Jaggadala. The five monasteries formed a network; "all of them were under state supervision" and their existed "a system of co-ordination among them. It seems from the evidence that the different seats of Buddhist learning that functioned in Eastern India under the Pāla rule were regarded together as forming a network, an interlinked group of institutions," and it was common for great scholars to move easily from position to position among them.

Vikramśīla prospered for about four centuries before it was destroyed by Bakhtiyar Khilji along with other major Buddhist centres around 1200 AD. Vikramśīla is known to us mainly through Tibetan sources, especially the writings of Tāranātha, the Tibetan monk historian of 16th-17th Century A.D. Vikramaśīla was one of the largest Buddhist universities, with more than hundred teachers and about one thousand students. It produced eminent scholars

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who were often invited by foreign countries to spread Buddhist learning, culture and religion. The most distinguished and eminent among all was Atiśa Dīpaṅkara. Subjects like theology, philosophy, grammar, metaphysics, Indian logic etc. were taught here, but the most important branch of learning was Tantricism. Vikramaśīla was a center for Vajrayāna and employed Tantric preceptors. The first was Buddhajnānapāda, followed by Dīpaṁkarabhadra and Jayabhadhra. The first two were active during Dharmapāla's reign, the third in the early to mid portion of the ninth century. Jayabhadhra was the first prominent commentator on the *Cakrasaṁvaratantra*. Śrīdhara was the next preceptor, followed by Bhavabhaṭṭa. The latter, also a prominent commentator on *Cakrasaṁvara*, may have been the mahāsiddha Bhadrapāda. He in turn was succeeded by three more prominent *Cakrasaṁvara* commentators, Bhavyakīrti, Durjayacandra, and Tathāgatarakṣita. Durjayacandra collaborated with the renowned Tibetan translator Rinchen Zangpo (*Rin chen bzang po*) and his commentary became particularly important for the Śākya school, and Tathāgatarakṣita collaborated with Rin-chen Zangpo. The remains of the ancient university have been partially excavated at village Antichak in the Bhagalpur district, Bihar state, India, and the process is still underway. Meticulous excavations at the site was conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India. It has revealed a huge square monastery with a cruciform *stūpa* in its centre, a library building and cluster of votive *stūpas*. To the north of the monastery a number of scattered structures including a Tibetan and a Hindu temple have been found. The entire spread is over an area of more than one hundred acres.

The monastery, or residence for the Buddhist monks, is a huge square structure, each side measuring 330 metres having a series of 208 cells, 52 on each of the four sides opening into a common verandah. A few brick arched underground chambers beneath some of the cells have also been noticed which were probably meant for confined meditation by the monks.

The main *stūpa* built for the purpose of worship is a brick structure laid in mud mortar which stands in the centre of the square monastery. This two terraced *stūpa* is cruciform on plan and about 15 metres high from the ground level accessible through a flight of steps on the north side. On each of the four cardinal directions there is a protruding chamber with a pillared antechamber and a separate pillared *maṇḍapa* in front. In the four chambers of the *stūpa* were placed colossal stucco images of seated Buddha of which three were found in situ but the remaining one on north side was possibly replaced by a stone image after the clay image was somehow damaged.

About 32 metres south of the monastery on its south west corner and attached with the main monastery through a narrow corridor is a rectangular structure identified as a library building. It was air-conditioned by cooled water of the adjoining reservoir through a range of vents in the back wall. The system was perhaps meant for preserving delicate manuscripts.

A large number of antiquities of different materials, unearthed from this place in the course of excavation, are displayed in the site museum maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India.

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The *Stūpa*

The Main *stūpa* at the center is a sacred solid structure raised over the body remains or belongings of the Buddha or a distinguished monk; or to commemorate any event associated with them. But some *stūpas* are merely symbolic made for worship by the monks. Votive *stūpa* is a miniature *stūpa* erected by a devotee in gratitude of fulfillment of his desire.

The Vikramśīla *stūpa* built for the purpose of worship is a brick structure laid in mud mortar and stands in the centre of the square monastery. This two terraced *stūpa* is cruciform on plan and about 15 meters high from the ground level. The lower Terrance is about 2.25 meters high from the ground level and the upper terrace is at a similar height from the lower side. At both terraces there is a circumbulatory path, the lower about 4.50 meters wide and the upper about 3 meters wide.

The main *stūpa* placed over the upper terrace is accessible through a flight of steps on the north side on each of the four cardinal direction. There is a protruding chamber with a pillared antechamber and a separate pillared *maṇḍapa* in front, placed beyond the circumbulatory passage. All the Stucco images are unfortunately broken above the waist portion. The images are placed over a brick pedestal having traces of paining in red and black pigments. The walls and floors of the chamber and Antechamber were plastered with lime.

The wall carvings of various deities

The walls of both the terraces are decorated with moldings and terracotta plaques which testify the high excellence of terracotta art flourishing in the region during Pāla period (8th to 12th Century A.D). Over the plaques are depicted many Buddhist icons like Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Maitreya, Jambhala, Mārīchī, Tārā and scenes related to Buddhism in addition to some social and hunting scenes and some Hindu deities like Viṣṇu, Pārvatī, Ardhanāriśvara and Hanumāna [21].

In Addition many human figures like that of ascetic or yogi, preacher, drummer, warrior, archer, snake charmer etc. and animal figures like Monkey, Elephant, Horse, Dear, Boar, Panther, Lion, wolf and birds are depicted.

The Architecture of the *stūpa* and the terracotta plaques bear great resemblance to the Somapura *mahāvihār*, Paharpur (Bangladesh) which too was founded by the same emperor Dharmapāla. On plan both are very much alike with the significant difference that Somapura is based on a central temple rather than a *stūpa*. Vikramaśīla monastery is also larger and has fort like projections on its outer wall.

Some other sculptures of Bihar and West Bengal

We have so far mentioned those surviving Hindu and Buddhist temples of the *prācya* region, whose erotic sculptures would be discussed with iconographic detail in the

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chapters 4, 5, and 6. For Orissa, Assam, and Tripura, fortunately, we are in a position to relate many of the erotic sculptures to their specific Hindu or Buddhist temples. The story however is not quite so in Bihar, West Bengal, and Bangladesh. While Paharpur alone has been successful in surviving the ravages of time, those in Bihar and West Bengal have either been subsumed by successive inundations by the innumerable rivers, or were desecrated by the Turko-Afgan invaders. For those which were destroyed by natural calamity, it was the sheer whims of nature that they do pop up from time to time at different nook and corners of the region and are preserved for the posterity. But for the desecrated ones, it is the priceless treasure lost for ever.

We have been able to list some such remarkable erotic sculptures that had surfaced in different parts of Bihar, West Bengal and Bangladesh, during the late 19th and 20th century archeological excavations. In most of the cases it is not possible to relate them to a particular monument as in case of their counterparts in Orissa, Assam, and Tripura. But our study has authentically placed them to a specific time, space, socio-religious category, and the School of art they possibly belonged to.

Notes

1. Debala Mitra, *Koṇarak.* ArchaeologicalSurvey of India,1976, p. 27.
2. Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture (Buddhist & Hindu),* p. 21.
3. Debala Mitra. op.cit., p. 28, 29.
4. Ibid., p. 32.
5. P. Brown, op. cit., p. 31.
6. Ibid., p. 39.
7. M. S. Bhattacharya, *Glimpses of Buddhist Bengal,* pp. 42-49.
8. Harihar Routray, *Ancient Monuments of Jajpur,* pp. 2-11.
9. Ibid., pp. 34,35.
10. H. K Boropujari, ed., *The Comprehensive History of Assam,* Vol I, p. 426, 428.
11. Ibid., pp. 429-433.
12. Ibid., pp. 447-454.
13. Ibid., pp. 456-471.
14. H. K. Boropujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam,* Vol II, pp. 351-359.
15. Ibid., pp. 360-366.
16. M. Islam, *Journal of the Varendri Research Museum,* Vol I, *1972.*
17. C.C. Dasgupta, *Pāhārpūrer Bibaran.* pp 11-18.
18. A. Ghosh, *Nalanda,* ASI, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 13,14.
19. Ibid., p. 20 ff.
20. Ibid.
21. M. S. Bhattacharya, Loc. cit.

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FOUR

THE BHAṄGIMĀ AND SYMBOLISM

We have already discussed in Chapter One that the erotic sculptures of *Prācya* region like their counterparts elsewhere in India were profoundly influenced by the various cults as well as *Tantricism*. The sculptures bear rich symbolism in various types of hand gestures known as *mudrās* and sitting and standing postures called *āsanas*. It would therefore be relevant to discuss in detail some of these *mudrās* and *āsanas,* with reference to the photographs of the sculptures included in this book. Along with that we would also go to frequently refer to the various types of ornaments viz, bangles, earrings, beads, pendants, and girdle-strings, which are an integral part of this symbolism. We would also discuss some of the weapons and other implements displayed in such sculptures and their significance.

Symbolic hand gestures or *mudrās* were employed in iconography in several ways. Worship (*pūjā)*, recitation (*japa),* and meditation (*dhyāna*) necessitated a profusion of *mudrās.* Even dance (*nṛtya*), usually considered as means of entertainment was given a different connotation in Indian spiritualism. Dance, interestingly, was considered a form of refined way of worship. So, for the danseuse it was quite natural to employ numerous *mudrās* while performing his or her art and these were strictly according to the prescription in the texts. Departure or aberration in this regard was out of question as all gestures and postures were codified in minute details. The temple dancers or the *devadāsis* had to undergo rigorous training from very early age under the supervision of specialist *gurus.* As they grew up as fine performers they found their place in the temples. All the various types of *mudrās* are said to delight the deities and help in integrating the devotee and the deity. According to Douglas Renfrew Brooks, it is also believed to remove all sins and helps in moving closer to a divine self that was aesthetically in resonance with the ultra-spiritual atmosphere of the religious shrines :

> With the extension of the pantheon there was also an increase in the number of poses of the hands(*mudrā*) and posture of the feet (*āsana*). And simultaneously there was also an increased attention paid to the technical details[1] .

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Among the most common *mudrās* which the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina deities display, happens to be the *abhayamudrā,* and the *varadamudrā,* while they are often shown in the sitting postures called *padmāsana,* and the *lalitāsana. Abhayamudrā* symbolizes divine protection, *varadamudrā* symbolizes boon. Again *padmāsana* symbolizes sublime spirituality, while *lalitāsana* symbolizes the relaxed mood of the deity. These certainly add a lot to total composition of a sculptural representation of the deity.

Not that in *Tantricism* alone do we find such postures and hand and feet movement. Several other religious systems of India, and in fact most of the ancient religions like the Maya, also have elaborate system of symbolic hand gestures, of course with different names and connotations. What *Trantricism* really contributed was that under the influence of *Tantricism* the artist of the Pāla era created a greater variety of images compared to his predecessors. Whether in terms of such divine postures, or representations of the contemporary society from a spiritual angle, these terracotta and stone or bronze creations, did carry an impression that was indeed symbolic and vibrant at the same time. In short these gestures went on to illustrate the various *rasas* of the sculptural art viz, *sṛṅgāra* (sex) *rasa, vīra* (bountifulness) *rasa, karuṇa* (pathos) *rasa, roudra* (anger) *rasa, advūta* (strange) *rasa, vayānaka* (scary) *rasa, vibhatsa* (ugly) *rasa, hāsya* (comic) *rasa, sānta* (calmness) *rasa, and vātsalya* (affection for the progeny) *rasa*. And not just in visual art forms, the contemporary Indian performing arts as well as the literature bears similar such reflections, mentioned several times in this work.

A few words about dress

As regards dress, *dhoti* was the most common attire of the males. The *dhoti,* used to cover the lower half of the male body, was worn in different ways. Several inscriptions of Pāhārpur show that it was worn both in *vikaccha* or *luṅgi* fashion as well as with *kaccha* which is the more formal style of wearing a *dhoti.* This trend is repeated in other sculptures of Bengal and Assam[2]. The upper part of the body was more often than not bare, with a vertically striped scarf or *uttarīya* loosely slung over the shoulders, drawn over the upper back and passing through the right armpit, was a common sight. It would also be pertinent to mention in this context that the use of *uttarīya* was prevalent mostly among the wealthier sections of the society while the lower classes conveniently left the upper part of the body bare. In addition to that sometimes a waistband or *kamarbandh* was also used to keep the garment tightly in place. A few other plaques in Pāhārpur, Mahāsthāngarh, Maināmatī, and Nālandā show that children instead of wearing a *dhoti* are wearing a *kotīvastra* or *kaupīna.* In short, *dhoti* was unquestionably the garment worn by adult males of late ancient and early medieval eastern India. The style of wearing a *dhoti* however, varied from one class to another and sometimes even from profession to profession. Even the deities as evident from the sculptures, or semi-devine beings like, *Gandharvas* and *Nāgas,* wear the same dress-material. Sculptures of Buddha, Padmapāṇi or Mañjuśrī and Śiva, Viṣṇu, Sūrya, Brahmā or Yama found in Pāhārpur, Mahāsthāngarh, Bāngarh, Maināmatī, Jagajjibanpur, Āmbari, Khiching, Konarak, Vikramśīla, and Nālandā,

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or those of the semi-devines, show them in the same attire[3]. We do find occasional references of other primitive type of garments worn by aboriginals, but that happens to be too few in descriptive representations[4] in the plaques or statues that we would be discussing in detail in the chapter 5.

In case of women *sāri* seems to be the most common wear, although there are other dresses as evident from the sculptures of Paharpur[5]. The *sāri* is worn in the *kaccha* fashion, below the navel, and having a *pallu* covering the upper part of her body. But there were certainly others, in fact more provocative, women's wear as evident from the sculptures that we have already referred to. One such is a type of shorts that covers her hips and ends only at the upper part of her thighs. It has a kind of waist band that after tying a knot and keeping the shorts at its proper place, was kept dangling. This waist band is found to be in various floral designs and was meant to add to the appeal. While this was the dress for the lower part of such female figures, the upper part was covered with varoius forms of bodice, tied in the back of her torso. But one important thing that needs to be added in the same vein is that this type of provocative dress habit is oft-repeated in the statues and figurines of *dvārikās, devdāsis, sabara* women, dancers, and such other women of low esteem[6]. Sometimes the *śabara* woman is even seen topless with a garland of leaves around her waist. The higher class women are however always in a *sāri* which were worn either in the *kaccha* or *vikaccha* fashion. In the latter there was a front pleat and the *pallu* was loosely strung over the shoulders to partially cover the breasts. Sometimes the breasts are covered by a long scarf strung over the neck and led to dangle loosely over the breasts. Interestingly enough the dresses of the female deities are almost identical as is evident from the sculptures of Gaurī, Manasā, Yamunā, Rādhā, Brāhmaṇī, or Tārā, Māyādevī, and Aparajitā[7]. On the other hand the Buddhist deity Parṇaśabarī is a sculptural replica of the śabara woman we have already referred to.

A look at the ornaments

The sculptures also show that men used various types of head gear—varying from the turban to the cap and various forms of jewellery like fillets, crowns, and headdresses. One terracotta head in Mahāsthāngarh shows a leaf-shaped ornament in the ear. Another one has a plain fillet on the top knot of the hair[8]. In one Maināmatī plaque a *Vidyādhara* is seen wearing an ornamental broad fillet on his forehead. Several other sculptures of stone and terracotta are shown to be wearing various forms of caps with varying types of ornamentation. The sculptures of deities are shown wearing decorated crowns as in case of the sculptures of Vajrapāṇi, Trailokyavijaya, and Nāgarjuna[9], Viṣṇu and Sūrya are also known for their specially designed crowns.

Wearing chains with pendants or necklaces were also quite common among men and women. A dancing man in a Pāhārpur plaque shows him wearing a necklace with an ovoid-shaped pendant. A *Gandharva* is also seen in another plaque, wearing a broad chain in his neck with a globular shaped pendant attached to it. A dancer is seen wearing a necklace with a

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gem-studded pendant. Even a soldier is shown wearing a thick gem-studded chain. Needless to say that the deities and their consorts as well as attendants are depicted in terracotta or stone sculptures, wearing one or more chains with pendants. Sometimes, those chains were actually string of pearls[10], as shown in the stone figurine of Yamunā and her female attendant. Not just Śiva wears a set of chains in his neck, even his attendant—Nandi the bull is shown wearing chains with oblong-shaped pendant in a number of sculptures. Interestingly, apart from gems, certain exclusive items like Tiger claws, corals of various shapes and sizes were used in these pendants.

Not just necklaces or chains in the neck, several other forms of jewellery were worn by the ancient people of Eastern India, as evident from the other sculptures. Quite a large number of male sculptures sport armlets of various shapes and sizes. In a Pāhārpur sculpture of an amorous couple the left arm of the male has a snake-shaped armlet. In another sculpture a warrior is shown wearing an armlet. Similarly the Hindu and Buddhist deities are found to sport armlets. In one sculpture, Lord Gaṇeśa, the deity is shown playing vīṇā with an armlet on his left arm[11]. Other deities like Śiva, Pārvatī, Yakśa, all have armlets either in one arm or both. The design of armlets worn by Buddhist deities like, Jambhala, Avlokiteśvara, or Tārā also show distinct floral designs on them. However, it must be mentioned in this context that women preferred to wear bangles with or without the addition of armlets that we have so far discussed. In Nālandā for instance, almost all excavated sculptures are shown to be wearing bangles. Similarly, the stone and bronze sculptures and terracottas of Mahāsthāngarh, Maināmatī, Khāḍi Maṇḍala, Chandraketugarh, Tāmralipta, Nālandā, Vikramaśīla, Konarak, Khiching, Āmbāri and Pāhārpur sport bangles, bracelets, and armbands.

If bangles were a common form of jewellery of the women as evident from the sculptures and terracotta figurines, anklets were another noticeable feature of the ancient man and woman's dress and accessories. Several sculptures are shown to have anklets of various shapes and sizes. Not only Hindu gods Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa, Manasā, and their attendants, but also Buddhist deities like, Padmāpāṇi, Vasundhara, Tārā, Jāṇguli, or Hārīti are found wearing anklets in the sculptures[12].

Hairdressing of both men and women was another worth-mentionable feature in the stone sculptures and terracotta as was in the contemporary life of eastern India. Hair was tied in a top knot with thick tresses falling on the shoulders, with ringlets of hair falling on the forehead. Sometimes the hair was gathered in a bun and left to fall on the neck or a coiffure arranged in a fan-like fashion[13]. Fillets, both ordinary and ornamented were used in hair decoration as evident from the terracotta, bronze, and stone sculptures. These hair-dresses were found to be identical in case of the sculptures of deities like Śiva, Viṣṇu, Agni, Brahmā, or even the semi-divine beings like, Gandharvas, *Kinnaras*, etc. Apart from the types of hairdressing that we find in the sculptures, the women also did it in three tufts twined in a particular pattern and left to dangle long down to the hips. Ancient Eastern Indian literature

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from as early as the Gupta era, are flush with descriptions of dancers *(apsaras)* moving along in extremely sensuous gait with their long (*beṇī*) tassels dangling provocatively on their hips. So hair fashion was also an integral part of the sculptural sensuality of Eastern Indian plastic art. Whether in the terracotta head of Yama of Mahasthangarh, or the semi-divine terracotta figurine from Mainamati, or the stone sculptures of Kṛṣṇa, or the octo-alloy image of Sarvāṇī in Tripura, this was quite a common practice. Another common hairdressing pattern, noted mostly among bramhins was to shave off almost the entire head and leave a single tuft of hair on the top. During the Pāla and Sena era this was virtually indicative of a bramhin. Yet, it is not uncommon to find similar hairdressing patterns among non-bramhins, as is evident from the sculpture of a man playing a drum. He is sporting the same hairstyle, but is not wearing the sacred thread, implying that he is a non-bramhin[14].

The details of the tools incorporated so far in this chapter, shall certainly help us to correlate the sculptures in their proper context and significance. Apparently, they might seem irrelevant to our overall spirit of discussion with special emphasis on the element of eroticism that has been the subject of analysis of these magnificent creations of art. Yet, even in remote sense, they help in our portrayal of the time that we have been trying to project. As we have emphasized in the earlier chapters, our intention has been to understand these sculptures in the light of the times, the exact social milieu that led to their creation and flourish, and the socio-religious factors that created the conditions for their loud and clear acclaim. These tools as one would see, definitely help in this regard.

Musical instruments and other accessories

It would now be worthwhile to discuss the accessories as depicted by the sculptures and terracotta figures. While the deities are shown to carry musical instruments like vīṇā, the sculptures of humans often show them playing flute, *damaru,* tabor, and such others. While on one hand this gives a reflection of the life in those times, it is also indicative of the sacredness of music in ancient Indian society. Music was closely associated with the tenets of Brahmanical religion as well as that of Buddhism in the later stages. As regards the sculptures and plaques on the walls of the Buddhist shrines like, Nālandā, Pāhārpur, and Vikramśīla, or the Hindu temples of Konarak and Khiching, we also notice a large number of the male and female figures playing flute, vīṇā, cymbals, *karatāla*, or *damaru.*

Many of the sculptures, especially the deities, apart from holding weapons, also have articles like rosary, *kamaṇḍalu* (specially designed water pot), conch-shell, books, pens, and such other items which are extremely significant and reflective of the specialization of that particular deity. Prajñāpāramitā for instance is seen holding a book to indicate her association with a text of the same name. Gaṇeśa's pen is indicative of his wisdom. Among the Buddhist deities, Mañjuśrī is seen with a bundle of palm-leaf manuscripts. Others like Padmapāṇi, Tārā, Maitreya, are either sitting on a lotus or holding a full-blown lotus in either hand[15], indicative of their exulted status.

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Weapons in the arsenal

Our discussion would be incomplete without a detail reference of the various weapons used by the deities as well as the humans in all these sculptures. The weapons range from bows, daggers, swords, clubs, sticks, axes, and spears. The plaques and sculptures of Pāhārpur, Nālandā, Jagajjibanpur, Khiching, Jajpur, and Mainām ati depict all these weapons in various shapes and sizes, sometimes in intricate details[16]. For instance, the weapons carried by the deities are often portrayed as oversized and ornamental, perhaps to exhibit their strength and impact when used. At the same time these weapons have great significance as each deity is identified with his or her trademark weaponry. Kṛṣṇa is always found to sport a *cakra*, Śiva with trident, Balarāma with plough, Indra with *vajra*, Kārtikeya with bow & arrow, Yama with club, and so on[17] .Interestingly, the Buddhist deities despite being vowed to non-violence also sport weapons. Mañjuśrī holds a curved knife or chopper, Vajrapāṇi is seen holding a *vajra* in his left hand, and Prajñāpāramitā holds a medium-sized sword in one of her hands. If such elaborate were the range of weaponry of the Hindu and Buddhist deities, the common man is depicted as carrying weapons like, bow & arrows, sticks, spears etc. Soldiers are shown in these sculptures and terracotta figurines as holding swords, shields, and clubs. In a sense this was indicative of the militant mood of the soldiers. Apart from the vivid depiction of the images of social and religious life of the common man and those of the ruling elites, these frequent portrayal of the deities and demi-gods in their available state, is definitely reflective of the integral and inclusive nature of the role that religion played in the life of the people of Eastern India.

Notes

1. A. Ghosh, *Nalanda*, p. 38, New Delhi, 1971
2. Sahanara Hussain, *Everyday life in the Pala Empire,* p. 71.
3. S.G. Ghurye, *Indian Costumes,* p. 77.
4. Ibid., pp. 121,122.
5. S. Hussain, op. cit., p. 92.
6. S.G. Ghurye, op. cit., p. 79.
7. S. Hussain, op. cit., p. 98.
8. Ibid., pp. 100-101.
9. S.K. Saraswati, *Early Sculptures of Bengal,* pp. 42 ff.
10. See for details, R.D. Bannerjee, *Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture*.
11. T.N. Ramachandran, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries along the Mainamati and Lalmai Ranges, Tippera District, East Bengal.*
12. S. Hussain, op. cit., p. 118-119.

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13. R.D. Bannerjee, Loc. cit.
14. Ibid.
15. T.N. Ramachandran, Loc. cit.
16. T.N Chakravarty, *Women in the Early Inscriptions of Bengal,* pp. 248.

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FIVE

THE CLOSE UP

Bengal Sculptures

A general discourse on eroticism in Indian art, more often than not overlooks the fact that in Bengal, overrun as it were by invading armies of the Turko-Afghans as well as the Mughals, only a few ancient Hindu or Buddhist shrines could escape devastation. The reasons therefore are too obvious to be missed—a general unavailability of materials for our discussion. The humid climate and excessive rainfall played no lesser role in obliterating the works of art throughout the alluvial plains of Bengal. Even those shrines fortunate enough to outlive their parallels in the big cities like Gauḍa , Puṇḍravardhana, Koṭivarṣa, Rāmāvatī or Karṇasuvarṇa, all of which have yielded traces of continuous habitation, with minor interruptions till the Turko-Afghan period, are located in the peripheral regions like the western Rādha, capable of discouraging the cavalry of the marauding forces. Unlike the Konarak or the Liṅgarāja temples of Orissa, these beautiful temples were made of burnt bricks with scant use of stone and their walls including that of the basement were profusely decorated with terracotta plaques of varying sizes and descriptions. These works of art could not escape the ravages of time as the plaques had fallen off from the niches on the temple walls meant for them and in absence of the patron classes in the changed politico-economic scenario, the shrines had sooner or later fallen into a permanent state of disrepair.

Fortunately enough, many of the plaques could be preserved for the posterity as earth gradually rose above them hiding them in the mounds of debris while the temples, mostly devoid of ornamentation due to the ceaseless process of decay stood amidst the surrounding debris, often covered by thick vegetation. The stone idol in the sanctum sanctorum either silently witnessed the decay or fell in the hands of the iconoclasts or some other people who found interest in collecting it as a souvenir. No wonder many such souvenirs found their way to the art collections distributed all over the world. Some other images were thrown into the

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water bodies near the shrines so that they could be saved from desecration at the hands of the invaders. This happened quite often in the big cities we have named heretofore because the fear of desecration was much more in those cities. The iconoclasts themselves also favored the idea of throwing the images into rivers and tanks subsequent to the defilement of the temples.

Another option open to them was to reuse the sculpted stones as building materials in the new edifices. The huge fourteenth century mosque called Adina (Malda district), the largest shrine built by the Turko-Afghans in the entire eastern region is the epitome of the style and technique that manifested the amalgamation of two different traditions in architecture, one indigenous and the other Central Asian. This is what has been termed as Indo-Saracenic architecture. Now Indo-Saracenic architecture, right from the 13th century AD, conveniently employed materials salvaged from older shrines either destroyed by the invaders or falling into decay on their own. Far away in the north, the Qutub complex in Delhi also bears testimony to this weird building activity as many sculpted figures in stone appear there. The Adina mosque of Pāṇḍua (the capital of Bengal for some time) also shows very many sculpted figures of gods and goddesses justifying our conjecture. The basement walls and the plinths, the outer and inner walls, the arches and the tympanums, the doorjambs, the *mehrabs* and the vaults of the Turko-Afghan buildings profusely utilized blocks of black stones with beautiful floral and faunal motifs and several other artworks salvaged from the destroyed shrines and secular buildings.

It was from the later part of the eighteenth century that especially through the efforts of the European officials of the East India Company and the Indigo planters stationed in the interior sub regions of Bengal many such sculptures and artefacts were unearthed or discovered through chance digging from various sites in Bengal. With the passage of time the Department of Archaeology as well as its successor the Archaeological Survey of India had taken up the task of digging up the past in a scientific manner throughout the British possessions in India. Another development meanwhile opened up a new vista to archaeological research in India. A host of scholars inspired by the romantic agony of 19th century Europe and the spirit of renaissance sought to discover the glory of ancient Indian civilization. In Eastern India the foremost among them were Raja Rajendralal Mitra, Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Sastri, Akshaykumar Maitreya, Kumar Sarat kumar Roy, Pandit Rajanikanta Chakraborty, Nagendranath Basu et al. To this list of venerable scholars were added numerous academics and lay enthusiasts in course of time. Through their efforts many new dimensions were added to our knowledge of the past. By this time, however, innumerable artefacts, sculptures and even relics of huge shrines and monasteries were dug out in various sub-regions of Eastern India. The sculptures revealed exquisite themes with a wide range of variety with a distinctive style of its own spanning over one and a half millenniums. This gradually came to be known as the *Eastern Indian Art* representing various periods beginning from the Mauryan era in the 3rd century BC and extending to the last days of the rule of the Sena dynasty in the 13th century AD. As to the period prior to the 3rd century BC., there was no definite diction or style that could surely be

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identified as indigenous to Eastern India. With the passage of time regional styles developed in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam with cognate features.

The terracotta of Tāmralipta (Midnapur district, West Bengal), Chandraketugarh (North 24 pgs, West Bengal), Khāḍi Maṇḍala (South 24 pgs, West Bengal), Bāngarh (South Dinajpur, West Bengal), Mahāsthāngarh (Bogra district, Bangladesh), Pāhārpur (Rajshahi, Bangladesh) are considered as the earliest samples of Bengal art with a definite diction of its own. For palpable reasons the pre-historic artefacts are not taken into consideration in our discussion of eroticism in art. Eroticism is more pronounced in the creations of the artists from the urban centers. Consistent and lingering expression of eroticism in art can not limit itself to depiction of nude figures with sensual carves alone. In fact it requires centuries of experience and tradition to lend a suave and urbane expression to a figure affording due importance to its drapery and ornaments, its postures and gestures and so on and so forth. We have numerous samples from the ancient urban centers of Bengal to vouch for our hypothesis.

Terracotta

Much before the Bengal artist developed expertise in stone carving he found clay as the most convenient material to give vent to his aesthetic ideas. We do not come across stone images from Bengal, dateable to the pre-Christian era. But the Maurya and Suṅga terracotta more than made up the void left by the absence of artworks in stone. Eroticism, the subject matter of the present study can also be amply elucidated through the terracotta retrieved from several excavated sites as well as those found from chance digging throughout the length and breadth of the province. First we come to some terracotta plaques from Tamluk, Bāngarh, Chandraketugarh and Gobardhanpur. A terracotta pottery fragment from Tamluk[1] assignable to the second century AD is among the remarkable samples. It shows a couple in profiles standing face to face and engaged in making love. The male figure appears overwhelmed by the intensity of emotion visible on his face. The expression of the female figure is that of convivial reciprocity. Nonetheless, this plaque does not reveal the overt characteristic of sensuality in the Suṅga art. Contrarily, a terracotta figurine, also dateable to the second century AD, from the excavated site of Bāngarh[2] seems to be sensuality incarnate. It shows in relief a lady holding a bird in her right hand in a carefree manner as she stands in a slight *ābhaṅga* posture [Plate V, Fig. 2] :

> The figure is extremely graceful and highly in agreement with the conception of Indian beauty. Her body is slim, waist narrow and composition delightful. In Kālidāsa we find *tanvi* (slim) *madhye kshāmā* (narrow waisted), *nimnanābhi* (of deep navel) etc., are used in connection with description of the ladies of ideal beauty [3].

The Sanskrit phrases are from the celebrated work of Kālidāsa titled the *Meghadūtam.* What intrigues us here is that Kālidāsa is widely known as a poet from the Gupta period while the Suṅga terracotta plaque under discussion represents a much earlier period of Indian history. Therefore it can be safely suggested that the concept of Indian beauty or sensuality embodied in

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it, is much older than the Gupta art tradition, acclaimed all over the world as the golden age of Indian art and culture. One more interesting point can not be missed in this context either. The basics of the ancient Indian art tradition did not remain confined to the heartland of the Maurya or Suṅga empires and spread to the outlying provinces like Bengal as well.

The Bāngarh lady in question has an elaborate coiffeur with a couple of rows of rosettes which enhance the beauty of her person. She wears garland with a locket coming down to her bosoms. Her large ear-rings rest on her shoulders. Far below her navel we find rows of girdles which go round her slender waist. Her face tilted to the right and the left leg stretched forward and left hand placed on the hip are quite in keeping with the symmetrical form of the plaque.

If the Bāngarh plaque is juxtaposed with a terracotta figurine of about the same period from Gobardhanpur[4] in the district of South 24 Parganas, certain interesting details come to the fore demanding our attention [Plate V, Fig. 3]. She holds a child with her left hand, a feature that earns her the label of a mother goddess. She is heavy breasted befitting her status of a mother goddess. Her waist is narrow in conformity with the standard of Indian beauty. But what actually is noticeable about her drapery is that nudity is carefully eschewed in her form. Her elaborate headdress and smug appearance indicate the fact that she represents an urban milieu, fastidious about apparel and ornaments. None the less, it is undeniable that the artist intended to infuse a good deal of sensuality into this figurine. Her eyes half-closed as it would appear, her large lips exuding a vivacious expression without breaking into a smile, the elaborate coiffeur perfectly synchronized with the oval-shaped face, her large breasts and above all the graceful and erect posture lend a unique sensual appeal to her appearance. That nudity is not a prerequisite for sensuality in the realm of art is vouched for by this terracotta figurine.

Another site, little over forty km to the north of Gobardhanpur, namely Tilpi[5] has thrown up different types of terracotta plaques. One such plaque [Plate V, Fig. 4] shows a lady with almost transparent drapery similar to the Bangarh figurine exposing her breasts and belly. She wears two layers of girdles round her waist. Her legs are more like a couple of plantain trees taking away the ease from her posture. Another figurine from Tilpi is only one of its kind in as much as she looks at a large mirror to ensure whether she is appropriately dressed up for some occasion. This actually reflects the urban lifestyle of the women of the sub- region called Khāḍi-Maṇḍala where a number of settlements flourished during the period.

The variations in the terracotta from Khāḍi-Maṇḍala may be ascribed to a diverse culture prevalent in the area dotted with a number of trade based urban agglomerations. Authorities have tentatively identified Chandraketugarh in North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, a site not far off from the Khāḍi-Maṇḍala with the ancient port city of Gaṅge mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*[6]. Discovery of some artefacts[7] from some sites in Khāḍi-Maṇḍala, Chandraketugarh, and Tāmralipta with distinct foreign influence adds credibility to the hypothesis.

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One moulded terracotta figurine from Tamluk possibly attracted more popular attention than anything else. This particular piece, housed in Oxford Museum, shows a lady [Plate VI, Fig. 1]. As many as four amulets hang from a heavy girdle she wears. These include a fish and a *makara*. It has been pointed out by authorities that fish symbolizes fertility and *makara* sexual love[8].

A careful survey of Bengal terracotta also exposes another fact. If the terracotta from Tamluk, Bāngarh, Tilpi, Dhosā or Gobardhanpur are only suggestive in the matter of sensuality those from Chandraketugarh are more revealing in the real sense of the term for here the expression of the artist is more exuberant and unabashed so much so that no other samples of terracotta from other contemporary centers of art in India can match them at all. To begin with we can mention a plaque displaying a scene of orgy where five male figures engage one female in an unusually cruel manner [Plate VI, Fig. 2]. Another square-shaped plaque shows a man forcibly copulating with a woman as a noose suspended above indicate the violent measures intended in the event of non-compliance by the woman [Plate VI, Fig. 3]. The terracotta from Chandraketugarh thus brought forth many more subnormal facets of life. Thus one of the plaques illustrates a lady engaged in masturbation [Plate VI, Fig. 4]. Various postures of love making are the themes of several plaques [Plate VII], which reveal the amount of popular interest in sexuality. The absolute openness and the liberty from inhibitions are the stunning features of these plaques.

The Maurya and Suṅga style was followed by that of the Kusana period. A good many samples of Kuṣāṇa art have also been dug up from Bāngarh[9] and other sites. The finds from Tamluk and Chandraketugarh are assignable to the period between 3rd century BC and 5th century AD. Terracotta plaques from the Gupta period therefore are also not exactly rare. But a large majority of them belong to the Suṅga-Śaka-Kuṣāṇa period[10]. Nevertheless, eroticism became more pronounced in the post-Gupta terracotta from Pāhārpur (Somapura Mahāvihāra) in the Rajshahi district in Bangladesh. The finds from Tamluk, Bangarh, Gobardhanpur and Chandraketugarh were mostly meant for decoration of interior walls of residential buildings. At times they were hung from the walls of living rooms as decorative pieces[11]. Pāhārpur plaques on the other hand were meant for embellishment of the outer walls of the monastery. The basement walls of Pāhārpur show a variety of figures of divinities, humans and animals along with floral motifs. They may lack the sophistication of the Maurya- Suṅga-Kuṣāṇa phase but surpass them in vigor and innocence mingled with inherent affinity with nature[12]. Stella Kramrisch, a leading 20th century exponent of Indian art while commenting on the Pāhārpur sculptures, mentions their 'unsophisticated expressiveness and bold decorative quality' and identifies them as 'local features'[13]. Therefore as works of art, we must not fail to note that the Pāhārpur plaques are in no way aesthetically inferior to those of the earlier period. The difference lies in the fact that they represent another phase of Bengal's history with different ethos and diction of art.

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Pāhārpur Sculptures

Hereinabove we have exclusively focused on terracotta art of Bengal. But while discussing the Pāhārpur sculptures it would be convenient to take up terracotta and stone together. Digs at Pāhārpur have exposed thousands of terracotta pieces and hundreds of stone sculptures many of which are stuck to the walls of the huge monastery. A good number of images have also been recovered from under the debris in various stages of excavation. There is in fact no dearth of exquisite samples with considerable sensuality. To start with we take up the beautifully carved stone image [Plate IX, Fig. 1] of a couple tentatively identified as that of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. But authorities like K. K. Ganguly opine that this couple should be identified as Kāma and Rati, the god of love and his wife[14]. The standing images passionately look at each other as the right hand of Kāma goes round the figure of his consort and touches her breast. The upper part of the female figure is nude while she wears a *sāri* tied with a girdle placed much below her navel. Her waist is narrow as if as a sequel to her heavy breasts. The *sāri* with numerous fine folds terminates near her ankles. The ornaments she wears include necklace, ear-rings, wristlets, armlets and anklets. Her hair is tied in a knot. The male figure also wears necklace, armlets and wristlets to adorn her slender figure. His left hand shows the *abhaya mudrā*. His *dhoti* has fine folds similar to the *sāri* of his consort. A few more images from Pāhārpur have similar theme. In another image [Plate IX, Fig. 2] we find a couple in a more playful mood. The female figure here places her left hand on the shoulders of her partner while the male figure holds her left breast with his left hand. From iconographical point of view this image bears close resemblance with the one described heretofore and seems to be of the same period. It would appear that these images were inspired by dancing figures as their postures are more akin to dance poses. The *samapadasthānaka* or erect stance, so common to countless images of the post-Gupta or Pāla era of Bengal art is absent here lending the images a vibrant rhythm. In fact the dancing poses have the effect of enhancing the sublime beauty of the sculptures in question.

Many more images from Pāhārpur are worthy of our attention as they are representative of amorous mood. One such image shows two flying figures, one male and the other female hugging each other closely as the male figure seeks to kiss his partner. Are they *Gandharvas* or demigods? We do not know for certain the inspiration behind this image [Plate IX, Fig. 3]. There are other images depicting amorous mood of couples not always as beautiful as the ones described above. The reason is simple. Pāhārpur represents artworks of a span of time extended to several hundred years. To conclude the discussion of Pāhārpur we should mention S.K Saraswati's comments :

> Early sculpture was not non-existent in Bengal and from what we know of the early specimens we find that up till the sixth century A. D Bengal was following the traditions of the great art centres of those early periods, e.g., the Mathura School in the Kuṣāṇa period and the Gupta School of Sarnath in its eastern version, the zone of which can now be extended as far east as Assam in the Gupta period. These

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styles and traditions had a common Indian character, at least so far as the hieratic art of the country is concerned [15].

As to the question of eroticism we have similar observation. It was not a detachable trend unique of its kind in Eastern India or Bengal. This would be evident from a comparative study of the sculptures of Gāndhāra, Mathurā, Sārnāth, Tāmralipta, Chandraketugarh and Bāngarh of the early period and Konārak, Khiching, Jajpur, Khajuraho and Varendra of the early medieval phase. The nuances appear in style and diction through the passage of time as regional overtone become more prominent without ever departing too much from the basics of Indian art traditions.

Early Medieval Sculptures of Bengal

In Bengal eroticism in art and literature was much in vogue as late as the early medieval period. The Pāla Empire had already witnessed a massive change in the socio- political milieu of Bengal partly due to its own expansion partly due to other factors at work. Contemporary literature, in spite of almost continuous warfare, provides a rosy picture of affluence in several urban centers that flourished during the period. The fledgling Bengali literature of the period does not portray any grave crisis. Despite delineating poverty of the common people it shows considerable devotion to eroticism[16]. Neither the celebrated works in Sanskrit desist from the erotic versions of episodes from the epics and the Purānas. Thus Sandhyākar Nandi in his *Ramacaritam* while describing Sitā's beauty compares her high, plump and closely set breasts with a pair of golden pitchers joined together (Ch.iii,v.23). Her thin waist (v.24), folds of skin in her belly (v.25), her forearm as soft as fibre of a lotus, the beautiful expanse of her well developed lips, and her eyes comparable with blue lotuses (v. 26) also find mention. As Kālidāsa is to the Gupta period so Sandhyākar Nandi is to the Pāla period. Plastic art of the period followed the same diction.

Bengal sculpture became more dependent on stone in the early medieval phase. Although the Bengal artist was introduced to the stone quarried from the Rajmahal hills as a durable medium as early as the second century AD[17] the real expertise was manifest in the post-Gupta phase only. Orissa and Bihar had an earlier exposure to this medium. Assam and Tripura on the other hand were introduced to it in the early medieval period; the sources in each region being different very often depending on the geographical location of the ateliers. Now we will take up their distinctive features so far as eroticism is concerned.

We have heretofore taken up the works of Pāhārpur alone. The early phase of the celebrated Pāla art is represented in Vikramaśīla (Bhagalpore district, Bihar), Nālandā (Nālandā district, Bihar), Jagajjibanpur (Malda district, West Bengal), Maināmatī (Coomilla district, Bangladesh) and numerous sculptures found from various sites as well. Very many stone sculptures of Bengal display eroticism in an extremely bold manner. The Umā-Maheśvara images of Bengal typify sensuality. In this class of Śaivite images, goddess Umā sits on the left

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thigh of Mahesvara [Plate X, Fig. 1], while the left hand of the god goes around the figure of Umā and touches her breast. Interestingly enough, some Umā-Maheśvara images from Khiching show the erect phallus of the god emphasizing the erotic aspect of the composition [Plate X, Fig. 2].

Even individual images of divinities from Bengal, Orissa and Assam at times display extreme sensuality. The black stone image of Buddhist goddess Tārā is one of the finest samples of Pāla sculptural art. Recovered from a village near the Jagajjibanpur (Nandadirghi Mahavihara, Malda district) the image shows the goddess standing in an *ābhaṅga* pose with her raised left hand bending at the elbow and holding a flower in a very graceful manner. Her right hand is stretched downward displaying the *varada* pose. She wears a *jatāmukuṭa* which adds to the serene and meditative beauty of her person. Her diaphanous drapery fully exposes her well proportioned body. From the point of view of iconometry also, this image is excellently executed. This 11th century work seems to be an example of the contemporary concept of beauty conceptualized by Sandhyākar Nandy as already mentioned. She has a completely sophisticated and suave look lacking in vigour but sharpened by elegance [Plate X, Fig. 3]. Not far removed in style and elegance is the seated image of another Buddhist goddess, namely Prajñāpāramitā housed in Malda Museum [Plate X, Fig. 4]. Here the goddess is seated in a meditative pose with her legs locked in *padmāsana*. Her head is tilted to the left adding to the beauty of the entire composition. She also wears a transparent drapery with fine folds appearing in the lower part of her body. The large necklace she wears comes down to her round breasts. A girdle fastens her *sāri* a little below her navel. Unlike the image of Tārā this image is profusely decorated. This is the reason for identification of the image as a product of a later period, possibly 12th century.

Tantricism, as we had mentioned earlier, had given much of the inspiration to erotic art. It was the tantric way of worship that emphasized *pañcamakāra* as the *upacāra* of prime importance. The *pañca* (five) *makāras* are *madya* (alcohol), *māṁgsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudrā* (coin or money), and *maithuna* (sex). Intoxication and corporeal pleasure in the opinion of *tantrācāryas* had a great role to play in *sādhanā*. The Tantric worshippers would also prefer the *asana* of *pañcamundi* or five skulls. In many Buddhist and Brahmanical images human skulls figure as weapons and ornaments. According to some Tantrics the skulls so depicted remind the devotee and the worshipper of the uselessness of mundane life, opulence, poverty, desire and achievement. The term *kāpālik* (*sādhus* who make extensive use of *kapāla* or skull) also refers to a Śaivite order of the Tantric worshippers.

There was overt sensuality in both Buddhist and *Brāhmanical* Tantric images. The images of Cāmuṇḍa are among the best samples of Tantric influence on Pāla art. She is a fierce goddess, scantily dressed and capable of evoking awe and reverence among the devotees [Plate XI, Fig. 1]. Sensuality was commonplace in many images of male divinities either. The image of Bhairava a Śaivite god found at a village named Bhaiyor in South Dinajpur district shows

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the multi-armed god with many weapons [Plate XI, Fig. 2 and 3]. Strangely enough, a beast, possibly a dog is seen engaged in sucking the penis of the deity[18]. Some images of Śiva, especially the Urdvaliṅga ones highlight eroticism. As a phallic symbol Liṅga was widely worshipped in Bengal throughout ages. Phallus worship became so popular in Bengal that the Buddha himself became a deity representing the fertility cult. A recently discovered image of the Buddha is a concrete evidence which shows him in the *bhumiparsa mudrā* (touching the earth with his right hand) while his right hand holds his penis[19] [Plate XI, Fig. 4]. Therefore it would not seem that eroticism was taboo at any point of time.

Bihar Sculptures

Bihar was as unfortunate as Bengal so far as the continuity of her old art traditions are concerned. Much of her old shrines were subjected to vandalism at the end of the Pāla-Sena rule. Ravages of time had taken a heavy toll of the Mauryan edifices as is well-known. The monastery of Nālandā and Vikramaśīla and a few other relics however preserved the artworks of the later periods under mounds of debris for many centuries. Like Pāhārpur, Jagajjibanpur and Maināmatī of Bengal, the digs at Nālandā and Vikramaśīla have thrown up numerous artefacts which bear testimony to the caliber of the artist from the region. Besides, there are several finds yielded by chance digging from different sites. The Mauryan period witnessed the high watermark of civilization and left its traces buried in various parts of Bihar. Some exquisite sculptures have been recovered from these sites. Eroticism, quite expectedly, is manifest in some of them. The famed Yakṣī from Didarganj [Plate XII] is representative sample known for its unique style, iconometric perfection, sartorial grace and overall elegance:

> The front view of the figure is fully in the round and hence is bound by no law of frontality. But one witnesses a superb craftsmanship in the treatment of the abdomen and the back, particularly in the region along the spine. The tall well built and queenly figure, in conscious and sophisticated appearance with the necklace hanging between the full round breasts, the shapely legs gradually tapering down to the thin ankles decorated with exotic ornament may easily be taken as the product of urban bourgeois society. The sensitiveness of the flesh as shown in the modeling of the lower body, the abdomen, the chin and the region round the eyes, is striking. Plastically fully round, the figure is meant to be seen from all sides. Its heavy but loose mass of hair, its full soft bosom and the firmness of the flesh, its attenuated waist and the broad lips recall the lively Yaksi figures of the Mathura reliefs[20].

Terracotta was also a convenient medium as would be manifest from numerous artefacts found in Bihar. Nandangarh, Buxar, Bulandbag, Bhiknapahari and Basra are considered as the centers of terracotta art of the region[21] The Divine Mother from Nandangarh [Plate XIII, Fig. 1] with her overtly sensual appearance is a remarkable piece although not due to any extraordinary elegance. It is a rather crude work arguably of the Śuṅga period. The mother goddess here unlike many other Śuṅga products is not heavy breasted but has an unusually large and deep navel. Some other samples of terracotta from Bihar seem to bear close resemblance with the terracotta from the coastal Bengal sites like Tilpi [Plate V, Fig. 4]. The attractive and well attired Lakṣmī from Nandangarh is one such image. The Śuṅga style and diction in art, as already observed had indeed a vast zone of influence to its credit.

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The Wonder of Nālandā, Gayā and Kurkihār

Eroticism was evident in very many sculptures attributable to the Śuṇga, Gupta and Pāla periods. Most of them conform to the iconographic texts that prescribe their features. The Pāla period seems to have restored much of the lost glory of the region as the big monasteries like Nālandā, Vikramaśīla, Odantapurī and other religious centers like the hermitage of Fulahari flourished. A 10th century stone image of the Buddhist goddess Vāgiśvarī from Nālandā [Plate XIII, Fig. 2] is worthy of our notice. The goddess here has a shapely figure with good deal of sensuality. The Pāla artist here, conforming to the contemporary trend of depicting well-developed breasts and slender waist of female figures excelled in lending the image with an extraordinary loveliness. This image is an inscribed one, being a product of AD 910 and affording us an opportunity to study the trends in plastic art of Eastern India. Similar style is noticeable in the Aṣṭabhujā Mārīci image from Bihar. The goddess stands in a *pratyālīḍha* pose which gives a sensual effect to the entire composition that distinguishes her from the seated as well as standing images with other poses. The upper part of her body with bulging breasts and slender waist is fully exposed [Plate XIII, Fig. 3]. The 9th century image of Khadirvanī Tārā, an inscribed image of AD 820, during the reign of emperor Devapāla, exemplify how the ornaments of several descriptions add to the beauty of a sculpted figure. In this image the sculptor exercised his sense of proportion in an excellent manner. The goddess wears ornaments like necklace, armlets, wristlets, anklets, ear-rings and a beautifully designed crown contrasting the simple decoration of the rounded b•ck slab [Plate XIII, Fig. 4]. One stone image from Gayā, worshipped at Kumārī Devī temple located in the old town is remarkable for her sensual as well as sartorial elegance [Plate XIV, Fig. 1]. The *sāri* she wears reaches down to her ankles. Fastened below her navel with a finely decorated girdle her *sāri* has diagonal folds. In many ways it is a notable work:

> It is somewhat massive in design, and bears a karaṇḍamukuta or crown of three tiers, and ear-pendants of an elliptical shape. It has two hands, the right one holding a citron or pomegranate and the left a lotus, the stalk of which goes down to the pedestal. There is a Śiva-liṅga on a Gauri-pat at the centre of the cell, and images of Śiva-Pārvatī, Śurya, Viṣṇu, Gaṇeṣa etc. are placed all round the cell [22].

The circumstantial association of the image testifies to her Brahmanical affiliation. Yet another Buddhist goddess, namely Nairātma is the subject of an immensely sensual image [Plate XIV, Fig. 2]. In this image, assignable to the 10th century AD and housed in the Indian Museum, the goddess dances on a corpse and wears a garland of skulls. Both Tantricism and Pāla art by this time had reached the pinnacle of glory and eroticism in art became a valued fashion throughout the length and breadth of the vast empire. So it is no wonder that numerous works of the same genre are found in Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Tripura and adjoining regions. Many of them were ordinary while some were masterpieces of great sculptors chiseled out with unfathomable care and attention evident even after a millennium of their existence.

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Among the bronze beauties we should mention the Prajñāpāramitā of Kurkihār from the 31st regnal year(AD 1023) of emperor Mahīpāla, housed in the Patna Museum [Plate XIV, Fig. 3]. This shows the goddess seated with her legs locked in meditative pose as her front left hand is placed in her lap holding a bowl. Her extended front right hand touches her right knee and shows the *varada* pose. The raised back hands of the goddess holds the usual implements. The cuteness of the image lies in the delicate but proportionate limbs of the deity, and serene expression on her face. The sensuality of her bare torso is somewhat overshadowed by the meditative expression on her face. This is apparent in some other bronzes of the period. The image of Dhanada Tārā [Plate XIV, Fig. 4] of an unknown provenance in Eastern India, housed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts would give similar impression. Also assignable to the 11th century AD. The four-handed goddess has limbs not as delicate as the Kurkihār image. She also seems lost in meditation. The meditative look, enhanced by her half closed eyes in spite of the sensual appeal heightened by her bared torso, it would seem is a unique feature of some bronze images of the Pāla School. To illustrate our hypothesis we can take a look at a painting appearing in a manuscript (No ADD 1643 of Cambridge University Library)of the same period. Here the six-handed goddess Vasudhārā is shown as a scantily dressed woman not too young, with slender and sensual figure [Plate XV]. Her eyes wide open and lips broad enough to lend her a confident and authoritative look absolutely suits the composition as she is flanked by a female attendant on either side. She is truly attractive in her *sāri* dotted with excellent designs and tied in a girdle round her narrow waistline below her navel. A thin part of her *sāri* across her upper torso partially covers her left breast. Decked in various ornaments she looks like a matriarch conscious of her imposing sensuality.

It is possibly an undeniable axiom that mediums chosen for execution of an artwork be it ancient or medieval, determine its overtone and effect to a considerable extent. Geography, therefore in case of most of the artworks is another determinant as it has the final say about availability of mediums. This is indeed the reason why terracotta, bronze and stone produce varying effects even without departing from the prescription of image making laid down in the *śilpaśāstras* .

Assam Sculptures

Most of the works on ancient and early medieval Indian art limit their scope to the territory called the lower Gangetic Basin in the East considering the Indus valley and the region to its immediate west as its western boundary, hardly noticing anything in the vast region called Northeast India. So the geography of early Indian art includes the Indus, Saraśvatī, Gaṅgā, Yamunā, and their several tributaries as the lifelines of the civilizations that flourished in Northern and Eastern India. Orissa for her long standing cultural affinity with Northern and Eastern India was fortunate enough not to escape the attention of the academics. But the largest river of the subcontinent, namely the Brahmaputra and its tributaries and several centers of art that came up on the shores of these rivers and the rich harvest of antiquities from those sites seldom

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featured in the standard works of Northern and Eastern Indian art. This myopia has considerably affected our concept of the art traditions of Assam, Tripura, Manipur and the adjoining states. In the realm of sculptural art the first two had made great contribution worthy of the attention of the whole world. Even as early as the Gupta period powerful dynasties ruled over Assam and contributed to the rich cultural mosaic of Northeast India. The Varmans of Kāmarupa establishing their sway over a vast region in the 4th century AD, continued to rule till the 7th century AD. Bhaskaravarmana, a contemporary of Harsavardhana of Northern India and Saśāṅka of Gauḍa or Bengal succeeded in capturing the capital of Gauḍa namely Karṇasuvarṇa in the early part of the 7th century. Xuang Zang, the celebrated Chinese traveler of the 7th century visited Kāmarupa and mentioned the prosperity of the kingdom and the prowess of its ruler[23]. The Varman rule in Assam saw significant development in the realm of art and culture. The rulers who followed them were also great patrons of art. The Pālas of Assam, contemporary of the imperial Pālas of Bengal are also known for their great role in giving Assam a distinctive cultural identity.

Many fine specimens from the late Varman and the succeeding periods have been unearthed from various sites of the region. Although considerable interactions with Northern India as well as Bengal took place, the Asamiyā School of art developed its own style and diction .There is evidence of suzerainty of the imperial Pālas of Bengal over parts of Assam[24]. Furthermore the use of black stone quarried from the Rajmahal hills give evidence of the cultural link between Assam and the heartland of the Pāla empire i.e. Gauḍa-Magadha.

As to the question of eroticism in art Assam offers an amazing variety of sculptures[25]. A 9th century stone block depicting two erotic scenes is a wonderful specimen [Plate XVI, Fig. 1]. The one to the left shows a nude female figure in a kneeling posture as her left hand supports her weight. A bull is depicted to illustrate bestiality as the theme of the sculpture. The other scene involves a female figure almost in the same posture while a kneeling male figure is seen in the act of copulating. Next we come to another stone block with two scenes again. One of them shows a seated male figure with his legs stretched forward. He embraces a lady seated in his lap from behind passionately kissing her and pressing her breasts [Plate XVI, Fig. 2]. R.D. Choudhury mentions it as *kṣīranīra* embrace following Vatsayan's terminology in his renowned work, namely the *Kāmasūtra.* The other scene shows a male and a female figure engaged in copulation [Plate XVI, Fig. 3]. Another erotic sculpture portrays a bearded male figure embracing a lady [Plate XVI, Fig. 4]. The lady here has a plump figure with huge breasts and a paunch in the abdomen. The sculptures described heretofore are made of sand stone and datable to the 9th century. The nude figures here are not very finely executed. Moreover corrosion has taken heavy toll of the finesse of the last mentioned work.

Individual sculptures also were often given an extremely sensual treatment. An image of Dvārpālikā [Plate XVII, Fig. 1] or female janitor, also from the 9th century AD and housed in the Assam State Museum is a unique sample extremely rare as it is. This sandstone image shows

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the standing female figure supporting herself on a sword held in her right hand. Interestingly, she holds a mirror in her raised left hand bent at the elbow. She is decked in various ornaments and seems extremely conscious of her beauty. This half nude female janitor evokes curiosity about the social milieu she represents. Janitors are supposed to be very alert and sensitive about their surroundings. But in this image the composition itself appears to be surreal. Or she might represent a milieu where her job was more ornamental than real.

The four-armed sandstone image [Plate XVII, Fig. 2] of Tantric goddess Bhuvaneśvarī assignable to the 11th century is a archetypal work with heavy breasts and thin waist .This seated image is disproportionate as her legs are too thin to match her heavy torso. But a much beautiful black stone figure of a goddess also dateable to the same period exhibits the skill of the Assam artist. This fragmented figure with its lower part missing bears much influence of the contemporary Pāla School. She wears a transparent drapery that exposes her breasts and belly [Plate XVII, Fig. 3].

Another image of a Tantric goddess of Brahmanical affiliation named Tripurābhairavi [Plate XVII, Fig. 4], datable to the 11th century needs to be mentioned. She is four-armed and decked in *muṇḍamālā* and *jaṭāmukuṭa.* She is seated in a *padmāsana* pose on a full-blown lotus. Her face is a bit lowered possibly in accordance with the prescription of some Tantric text. Unlike Bhuvaneśvarī she is slightly pot-bellied. Miniature images of the Saptamātṛkās and their respective consorts or Bhairavas appear in the image. This image is assignable to the 10th century.

The ancient art of Assam survived beyond the early medieval phase. Stone images from the 13th and 14th centuries are not rare in Assam. When Bengal and Bihar suffered the agony of Turko-Afghan invasion Assamese sculptural art experimented with newer styles. The 13th century images of Gaṅgā and Yamunā, in Assam State Museum, full of grace and sensuality support our conjecture. The back slabs of these sculptures are virtually devoid of any ornamentation in sharp contrast to the images from the Pāla and Sena period in Bengal and Bihar of the previous century. This simplicity might also be interpreted as the features of a dying art. But in any case one would perhaps admit that these artworks were the valued samples of an age old tradition which had no contemporary parallel that survived in the adjacent provinces of Bengal and Bihar with which to match and evaluate its own art creations. As in the case of much richer and widely variant Bengal and Bihar, it also manifests the continuity of the rich sculptural tradition, rather for a longer period than Bengal or Bihar.

Tripurā Sculptures

In ancient times a large part of Tripurā with the present Bangladesh district of Coomilla formed part of the province of Samataṭa. Samataṭa had always been considered an integral part of Bengal. The province was once administered from the city of Karmānta identified with a place called Barakāmta. Samataṭa at times was ruled independently by powerful dynasties. The

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Khaḍga dynasty was one such house firmly established in the region. An octo-alloy image of [Plate XVIII, Fig. 1] the Brahmanical goddess Sarvāṇī (a form of Durgā) was installed by queen Pravāvatī, the wife of king Devakhaḍga. This image, about 51 cm in height interestingly was gilt with leaves of gold. The provenance of this beautiful work being Deulbari in Coomilla district we can safely presume that the sculptural art of Tripurā as well as Samataṭa is definitely of the pre-Pāla origin. The inscribed image of Sarvāṇī accompanied by two female attendants testifies to the prevalence of eroticism in plastic art. The limbs of the figures are cast in low relief with good deal of sensuality.

The stone sculptures of Tripurā assignable to a later period reflect the Pāla style only. The image of Cuṇḍā from Pilak [Plate XVIII, Fig. 2], housed in the Government Museum of Agartala , although corroded to some extent arrests the attention of the students of iconography. The image is not the commonplace heavy breasted type. This departure however can be noticed in several other Pāla sculptures and can not possibly be regarded as a unique statement with regard to style.

The evolution of the plastic art of Tripurā[26] is best demonstrated at Pilak in south Tripurā, Unakoṭi in the northwest and Devtamuḍa near the town of Udaipur a little southeast of Agartala, the capital of modern Tripurā. The first two show the post Gupta and Pāla samples while the last mentioned site is attributed to medieval trends in Tripura's art traditions. Unakoti boasts of a unique treasure of large images in bas relief where prominent limbs of Śaivite deities nicely carved display the penchant of the artist for sensuality. The rock cut figures of Devtamuḍa, on the other hand are of the medieval period. These works bear the marks of local traditions. The artists here have made a departure from the conventional Pāla style. This is manifested in some of the sculptures. One image of Pārvatī wears a *pāchhrā*, local attire meant for the women.

The Tripurā sculptures found in the sites mentioned heretofore should more appropriately be termed as the Samataṭa sculpture. This is the reason why the bronze sculptures of Maināmatī in Coomilla (Bangladesh), Jhewari in Chittagong (Bangladesh) and those from Tripurā (India) bear striking resemblance with each other[27]. Samataṭa had to its east the forest infested hills of Tripurā, while the river Meghna and Padma formed its western boundary. The shores of the Bay of Bengal could very well be considered the southern boundary of the sub-region called Samataṭa meaning *level shore*.

It is also to be noted here that the artists of the sub-region, following the contemporary trends in art depicted sensuality with consummate ease. An image of Vasudhārā from Jhewari, with her slender figure, prominent bosoms and a little bulge in the belly, assigned to the 12th century AD on stylistic consideration is an example of the finer works of the Samataṭa artist. Yet, any presentation on the sculptural art of Tripura would be incomplete without the reference to Unokoṭi and Devtamura about which we have discussed in detail in Chapter Two

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and need not be repeated any further. It may only be reiterated that these gigantic sculptures are very much in continuity in the rich traditions of the region and was definitely inspired by the Pāla school rather than the Ahom as claimed by some historians.

Jharkhand Sculptures

The sculptures of Jharkhand are interesting in many ways. The state due to its unique location had been a meeting point of several cultures. Located to the south of Magadha and east of Gauḍa and Rāḍha it witnessed the cross- currents of many remarkable art traditions of ancient India. As for example we can refer to Itkhouri in Hazaribagh district, a settlement site with an amazing store of antiquities :

> It is to be borne in mind that the site witnesses three successive stages, i.e. (1) Mouryan from 300BC., characterized by large blocks of grayish yellow sandstone carved with geometrical floral motifs and Buddhistic figures; (2) Gupta period characterized by smaller Buddhistic figure sculptures in mottled pink sandstone possibly from Chunar about 600AD.; (3) Pāla-Sena sculptures of Tārā, Avalokiteśvara, and other Buddhistic figures, from 800-1150 AD [28].

It would just be natural that a tradition as old as one and a half millennium was capable of reflecting various facets of life including eroticism. A colossal image of Tara about 180 cm in length testifies to our hypothesis. This two-armed image made of Rajmahal black stone conforms to the tenets of the Pāla School of art. Contemporary Magadha and Varendrī had produced numerous images of this genre. Scantily clad and modestly ornamented, the present image represents a period when Pāla art had taken firm roots in Eastern India. The inscribed image is from the reign period of Mahendrapāla, the fourth Pāla emperor who ruled in the 9th century. There are other images from the region depicted in various poses not far removed in style and execution from the contemporary artworks of adjacent sub-regions. Nevertheless, the sensual beauty of the Jharkhand sculptures is always capable of arresting the attention of any viewer as they are in most cases the works of the master sculptors [Plate XVIII, Fig. 3].

Orissa Sculptures

The wonderful sculptural art of Orissa hardly has any parallel in Eastern India so far as eroticism is concerned. The reason is worthy of a discussion. Not only in terms of quantity alone but also with regard to size and variety the plastic art of Orissa has proved to be amazing. Furthermore the sculptural treasures of Bengal, Bihar and Assam are not as consistent as that of Orissa in portraying sensuality throughout a long period of time. The Maurya-Śuṅga erotic terracotta plaques of Chandraketugarh in Bengal as already discussed could not carry forward its legacy to the Paharpur sculptures of the post –Gupta and Pāla phase. In case of Bihar also the Maurya, Suṅga sculptures of the early period had not much influence on the Gupta or Pāla period works of the later period. In Assam as well, style and diction differed and the works of the late medieval period looked far removed from those of the earlier period.

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Even eroticism had its own variety of expressions. The expressions of Chandraketugarh terracotta were as overt as to the extent of depicting bizarre sexual acts. Similar was the case of the early medieval Asamyā art as it broke away from the relatively modest sensuality of the Pāla School. This diversion of trends and evolution of style in the realm of art have not yet been exhaustively studied. In Orissa on the other hand eroticism in art became all pervasive in the early medieval period and curiously enough it did not appear in prolonged patches in the earlier periods.

The Magic of Konarak

To start with we can take up the Sun temple of Konarak , considered as the greatest monument of erotic art in Eastern India :

> A word is necessary on the flagrantly –erotic sculptures of Konarak, which, by their character, large size and enormous number , can not fail to draw the attention of the visitor. A strong sensual element is almost ubiquitous in the art of different places and times. Life in its voluptuously physical aspects is depicted on the terracottas of as early as the Suṅga period (second and first centuries B.C). Again, amorous adventures and frank statements of the most earthly aspects were never a taboo in old literature. To the artist art is amoral. Apart from Konarak and many other temples of Orissa, there are centres where it plays a prominent part in temple decoration. There does not seem to exist any canonical injunction on the occurrence of erotic sculptures on temples. No popular explanation (for example their being the outcome of a desire to ward off lightning or the evil eye) carries convictions. No less doubtful are such modern pseudo-spiritual explanations as that the sculptures were intended to test the devotees, so that only those who remain psychologically unaffected by them were considered eligible to enter the sanctum sanctorum. Nor can the sculptures be regarded as illustrating the kāmā-sāstras (erotic texts) or Tantric practices and perversions. Any plausible explanation must take into account their possible historical developments from the simple and amorous *mithunas* (couples) occurring on early temples. The artist has impartially depicted all the *rasas* (sentiments) and has in no way emphasized *sringara* (erotics) over others[29].

The amorous couple from temple [Plate XIX, Fig. 1] though corroded to a considerable extent is by far one of the best works from Konārak. Superbly modeled as it is its iconometric excellence draws anybody's attention. A male and a female figure with well-nourished limbs are seen in a close embrace. The lady extends her right hand to place it around the shoulders of her partner and touches her chin with her left hand. The expression in her round face is that of a fantastic pleasure which is emphasized by her large eyes and lips. She is in fact leaning against the stout body of her partner and this has caused a slight tilt of her head to the left. Her svelte figure, her large and round breasts add to her voluptuous beauty. A large necklace worn by her comes down to the middle of her bosoms. Her ear-rings are remarkably large. The male figure however stands erect with a bemused smile on his face as if to gently respond to the emotive gesture of the lady. In some other sculptures the response of the male figures are not in the same fashion. One image [Plate XIX, Fig. 2] depicts a male figure as passionately raising the face of a lady with her left hand while the lady eagerly awaits a kiss embracing her partner. There are more samples reflecting other moods of couples. Yet another couple from temple 1 [Plate XIX,

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Fig. 3] appear quite different. Here a *sādhu* is engaged in love making with a beautiful lady. He touches the right breast of the lady as the lady raises both her hands in the fashion of a Salabhanjika. She is completely lost in the act but the bearded *sādhu* does not seem to display any emotion. Yet another sculpture shows an old man entertained by some women. Is he a lewd rich man capable of showering bounty on the hapless women or a lecherous man routinely enjoying the service of his slaves?

There are plenty of sculptures from Konarak which would appear outrageously sensual if judged by modern standards. There are life-size sculpted figures of mythical sages with bared phallus. Episodes from Indian mythology carved in stone add to the richness of the whole appearance of the temple. Nudity is a major feature of many of the works. Most of the figures are vigorous. The society and economy also were reflected in all their vibrant hues. A few examples would suffice. One sculpture shows a lady receiving a post natal medication prescribed in Āyurvedic texts. She stands in an akimbo stark naked as a smoldering pot of incense and other medicines is placed between her stretched legs. This appears to be an illustrated page out of an Āyurvedic text and in spite of the nude figure does not seem to be an erotic sculpture as such.

Scores of images from the sprawling temple site are individual figures of demigods, *apsarās, alasa-kanyās* and danseuses. Music and dance with all their colorful varieties found expression in Eastern Indian sculptures like those of other centers of art elsewhere in India. A plethora of images showing dancing figures throng the shrines be it Buddhist or *Brāhmanical.* So is the case of musicians playing at various musical instruments. Sensuality can be more illustrative in these individual sculptures as different poses add to the beauty of a figure as they are ridden of the stiffness of a sculpted figure. A ravishingly beautiful image [Plate XIX, Fig. 4] of a danseuse playing on cymbals is among the best samples. Her right leg is extended with an elegant fold at the knee while her left leg is stretched forward keeping the balance of her body. The cymbals are raised to her left shoulder as she is playing them with practiced ease of a professional musician. She is not a svelte beauty and looks vigorous with her shapely limbs. She is heavy breasted as usual. Her waistline also conforms to the standard of Indian beauty. But the modeling of her figure singularly supple display strength and confidence. Such figures are not rare at Konarak. The lady with a drum [Plate XX, Fig. 1], a danseuse also from Temple1 like the former is also worthy of attention for the unique pose as her body is tilted to her right. Her nude torso is beautifully chiseled showing her prominent breasts and flat abdomen. The hairdo, necklace, ear-rings, armlets and bangles contribute to the completeness of her good looks. Another danseuse [Plate XX, Fig. 2] playing a long pipe is also exquisitely carved as her head is tilted to her left adding to the natural grace that the sculptor had endowed her with.

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Khiching and Jajpur

The erotic magic of Orissa does not end at Konarak. There are other towns and temples that can take pride in their erotic art. The 11th century temple at the town at Khiching in the district of Keonjhar is one of them. Khiching, the capital of the kings of Mayurbhanj and its surroundings are well-known for its antiquities. Prehistoric artefacts have also been recovered from the area. In the Mauryan period, Orissa or Kaliṅga was a very powerful state, so much so that it invited the wrath of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka. The story of Kaliṅga war of Aśoka is known all the world over. The glory of Orissa did not seem to wane as art and culture of the region continued to flourish under several powerful dynasties despite repeated warfare with neighboring kingdoms. The Śailadbhavas, Bhaumas, Eastern Gaṅgas and the Bhanjas were at the helm of affairs one after another in the post –Gupta phase and thereafter when Orissa became more and more renowned as center of culture :

> The fame of Orissa as a centre of learning reached even beyond the frontiers of India to China during the Bhauma rule. From the history of China it is known that the Bhauma ruler Śubhakardeva sent the manuscript of a religious treatise along with a letter(now preserved in China) to the Chinese emperor towards the close of the 8th century. The episode, apart from revealing cultural relations with China, is a tribute to the culture and learning of Orissa during the Bhauma era. Towards the beginning of the 9th century the Bhauma kingdom broke up in confusion and in the sequel the vassals of the Bhaumas established themselves in their own regions. Of them the Bhanjas of Mayurbhanj came to limelight in w . Orissa not only as powerful rulers but also as great patrons of art. The sprawling remains of KHICHING(Khijjiṅga-Kotta)indicates that under the Bhanja Chiefs, KHICHING was a prosperous town where Bramhanism, Buddhism, and Jainism flourished at an equal pace and a distinctive school of art and architecture had grown up in the region[30].

The temple of Khiching is much smaller compared to Konarak but the symmetrical design of the main temple and the others in the compound had always been earning admiration of the visitors. The sculptures decorating its outer walls are so beautiful that Khiching is unmistakably considered as one of the most significant monuments of Indian erotic art. Most of the sculpted figures are not as large as those of Konarak but even the smaller figures are worthy of intimate observation. At Khiching also one would come across several figures of Indian mythology like the Nāgas and Nāgis. Interestingly the Nāga figures have predominance over others at Khiching, a phenomenon possibly attributable to the huge following of the Nāga cult. The Nāgas and Nāgis are actually represented as half humans and half serpents with the lower part of their body depicted as that of a snake. Several such figures have been found in Bengal and Orissa representing the ancient cult[31]. The Nāgas and Nāgis [Plate XXI, Fig. 1] are amazingly beautiful sculptures often appearing in folded hands and forming the decorative pillars of temples. At Khiching these figures are usually quite tall decked in various ornaments. The Nāgis, semi-divine damsels as they are, look very surreal in all respects.

The walls of the Kicakeśvarī temple at Khiching have several other excellently sculpted figures of which the variety is interesting. A niche on the wall shows a standing male figure with

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his raised left leg placed on the right shoulder of a squatting female figure. The female figure is sucking at the penis of the male figure [Plate XXI, Fig. 2]. Both of them are stark naked as they are engaged in this sexual act. Below this figure another niche shows a male and a female figure passionately kissing each other. Depiction of this sort of sexual act is not rare at Khiching. Another group shows a male figure engaged in making love with two ladies [Plate XXI, Fig. 3]. One lady standing face to face with the male figure is about to kiss him while a lady kneeling in between the figures is sucking at his penis. Another plate [Plate XXI, Fig. 4] shows three females and one male. The man is assaulting a prostrate figure and a lady is assisting him in the criminal act. The third female figure, possibly frightened by the gory act is standing behind with folded hands, perhaps begging for mercy. Needless to say that the female figures are all nude, and reminds an act of perversion closer to sodomy.

Amorous couples standing face to face are abundantly displayed in the temple walls of Khiching. But far more appealing are the individual sculptures. One such image [Plate XXII, Fig. 1] shows a lady standing in a unique posture, raising her left hand above her head as if to form a canopy. Her right hand touches her left breast while her right leg is drawn back with a fold at the knee. This figure has a wonderful aesthetic look. Another standing female figure, stylistically of the same class, is shown with her hands raised and locked above her head. Her right leg is stretched forward towards the left, while the left is drawn back. She seems to be in a playful and leisurely mood and yet exudes a very powerful vivacious charm [Plate XXII, Fig. 2].

The other Orissan town having a sizable concentration of such erotically appealing temples and sculptures is Jajpur. Whether it is the Virojā Devī Temple, or the Saptamātṛkā temple on the banks of Vaitaranī, all are *Śaktīpīthas* and are store houses of Tantricism and its erotic manifestations in plastic art. The image of Cinnamastā [Plate XXII, Fig. 3] at Virojā Temple is a pointer to the spread of Tantricism in the region. The Cinnamastā as we know is one of the prominent *Daśamahāvidyā* goddesses worshipped by the Tantrics. The deity holding one of her severed head in one hand and drinking the streams of blood oozing out of the neck symbolizes the *mahāsukha* or *ultimate bliss* which is otherwise achievable only by intense copulation. Through a heady mix of religion and display of physical love these excellent sculptures go on to create a complex aura of mysticism, Tantra, and man-woman relationship which is so very unique and transcendent through ages.

Notes

1. See for details P.K. Mandal, *Interpretations of Terracottas from Tamralipta*, Tamluk, 1988. Also see N.R.Roy, *Bāngālīr Itihasa, Adiparva,*
2. K. B. Goswami, *Excavations at Bangarh*, p.19, Calcutta, 1948.

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3. Ibid.
4. Gobardhanpur is located at the shores of the Bay of Bengal. For many years now the site has yielded numerous artefacts datable to the Maurya and Suṅga periods.
5. Tilpi and Dosā are two settlement sites a little to the north of Gobardhanpur. These two sites have also thrown up a wide variety of antiquities. Infact the district of South 24Pgs have several such sites.
6. N. R. Roy, "Tamralipta and Gange-Two Port cities of Ancient Bengal and Connected Considerations" in *Tamralipta-Tamluk in Archaeology and History* (Ed. P.K. Maity et.al) p. 85, Tamluk 2009.
7. See P. C. Dasgupta, The Early Terracottas from Tamralipta, *Indian Folklore,* Vol I, no.1, January-March, 1958, pp. 17ff.
8. E. H. Johnston, 'A Terracotta Figure at Oxford', *JISOA*, Vol. X, 1942, pp. 94-102.
9. K. B. Goswami, op. cit., p.37.
10. N. R. Roy, loc. cit., p.687.
11. K. B. Goswami, op. cit., p.19.
12. N. R. Roy, loc. cit.
13. Stella Kramrisch, 'Pāla and Sena Sculpture', *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol VII, PART ONE, (ED. K.Vatsyayan, p.442, Kolkata, 2006.
14. K. K. Ganguly, *Bāngālār Bhāskarya*, pp. 70-71, Calcutta, 1986.
15. S. K. Saraswati, *Early Sculptures of Bengal*, p. 81, Calcutta, 1937.
16. Many erotic expressions are found in the *Caryāpadas* considered as the earliest samples of Bengali literature. See for details Malaysankar Bhattacharyya, 'Bengal Art Through Ages: Evolution of Cults' in *The Historical Review*, vol xvii, 2009, Kolkata.
17. Malaysankar Bhattacharyya, *Art of Bengal: The Sculptures of the Mahānandā – Karatoyā Valley (2nd to 12th century)* , Vol I, pp. 2 ff, Kolkata, 2002.
18. Ibid., p. 10.
19. M. S. Bhattacharyya, 'Bengal Art Through Ages: Evolution of Cults', *The Historical Review*, Vol. XVII, p. 53, 2009.
20. N.R. Roy, 'Maurya and Suṅga Sculpture', *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. VII. PART ONE, (ed. K.Vatsyayan), p. 374, Calcutta, 2006.
21. C.C. Dasgupta, 'Ancient Indian Terracottas', *The Cultural Heritage of India,* pp.347-48.
22. S.K.Sarasvati & K.C. Sarkar, *Kurkihār, Gayā and Bodh-Gayā*, p.47, Rajshahi,1936.
23. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, pp. 22-36, Delhi, 2004.
24. Ibid., p.36.
25. R.D.Choudhury, *Catalogue of Stone Sculptures: Assam State Museum*, Guwahati, 1998.
26. An interesting study of Tripura Sculptures can be found in Goutam Sengupta's 'Early Sculptures of Tripura' in *Studies in the History of North-East India* (ed.) J.B.Bhattacharya,

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Shillong, 1986.

27. See for details Asok K. Bhattacharya, *Jhewari Bronze Buddhas: A Study in History and Style*, p.20, Calcutta, 2000. Also see M.S.Bhattacharya, *Glimpses of Buddhist Bengal,* pp. 51, 66, 83-84, Calcutta, 2008.
28. For this opinion we are indebted to Bulu Imam, a noted archaeologist of Jharkhand. In his dissertation titled *Notes on Buddhist Sites from Antiquarian Remains of North Jharkhand.* Imam has poignant;y analyzed the basic features of the artworks of Jharkhand with many of the noteworthy nuances. Very few studies on ancient art of Jharkhand have so far come up. See *The Historical Review*, Vol. XVII, 2009
29. Devala Mitra, *Konarak*, pp. 37-38, Calcutta ,1976.
30. M.S.Bhattacharyya, 'The Naga Cult and Some Iconographic Riddles', Bulletin of the Akshay Kumar Maitra Museum. Vol. 5, No. 1.
31. A.Ghosh(ed), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology,* pp. 160-161, New Delhi, 1989.

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IN THE END ....

We have, through our five chapter discourse and accompanying plates, tried to present one of the most glorious yet controversial aspect of Indian culture. Through this elaborate discussion we presume, that we have been able to project the late ancient and early medieval plastic art of Eastern India in its true perspective. The artistic excellence of these magnificent sculptures that transcended through ages; the reflective genuineness of these creations in portraying contemporary society; and of course the predominant aura of sensuality that made them the cynosure of all eyes. The attribution of so-called "erotic" tag to these wonderful creations therefore can only be described as one-dimensional. Because as A.L Basham observed in his *The Wonder that was India*, "Sexuality was not looked as a mere vent of animal passions... but a way of life in general in ancient India. This erotic preoccupation of ancient India is made evident in art and literature. Unlike the slender bodied female figures in modern Europe or the matronly type female figures in ancient Greek sculptures, the concept of feminine beauty in ancient India, reflected through heavy thighs, broad hips, and voluptuous breasts, but narrow waists, was meant primarily for physical satisfaction".

That sexual satisfaction of both married couples and unmarried partners was perfectly natural and considered as an integral part of life is not only expressed through the contemporary literature and art, but was sanctified even through their references in various religious texts. In fact though the learned bramhanas, for ages, while composing the Vedas and Upanishads, and laying down canons of behaviour for Indian layman, were puritanical in many respects, they did not pour scorn on physical love. Rather, the word *kama* which stood for every kind fulfilment like desire and passion, usually had a sexual connotation. So, of all legitimate pleasures, sexual pleasure was considered to be the best. Therefore, by all ways and means sexual pleasure was an integral part of Indian life, and that too with all the legitimacy and social acceptance. Sexual act in ancient India was indeed a positive religious duty and never a taboo. On the contrary sex was usually dealt with an open mind, without inhibitions, or any forms of deceit and falsehood. Naturally, the ancient Indian literature is full of sexual allusions, sexual symbolism, and candid eroticism. As another potent form of artistic expression ancient Indian plastic art were only in tandem with the contemporary beliefs and ideas by being explicitly erotic.

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PLATE - I

Kichakesvari Temple (Khiching)

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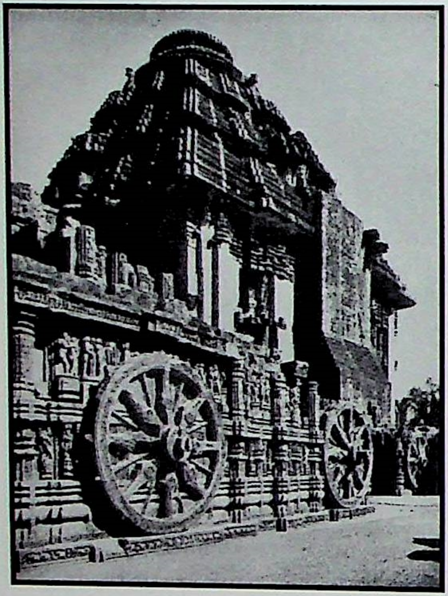
PLATE - II



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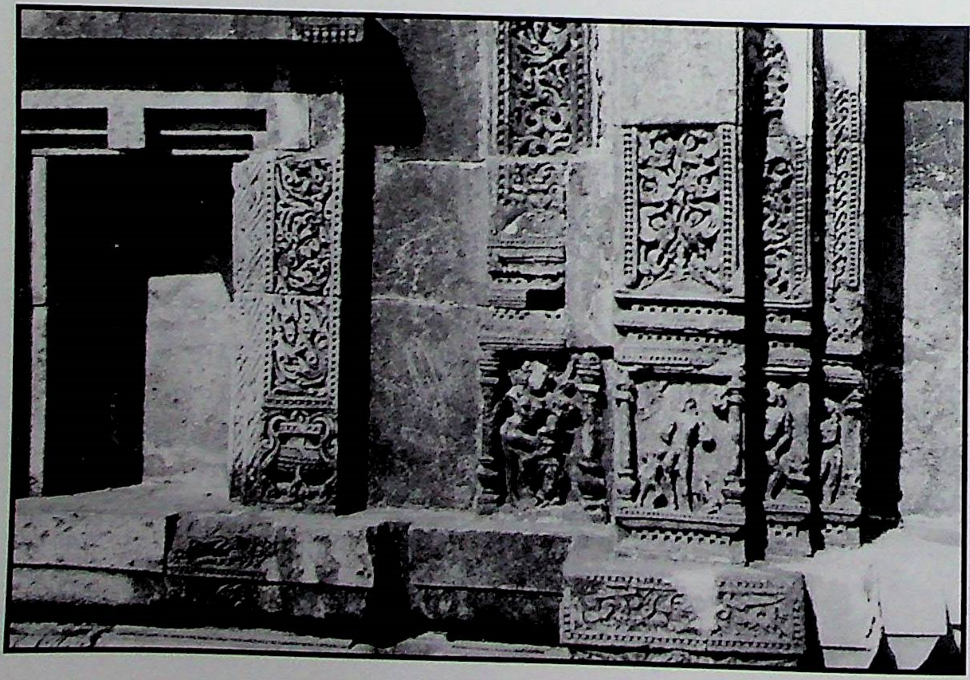

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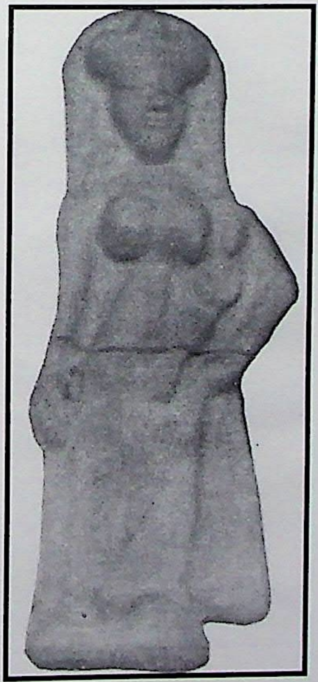

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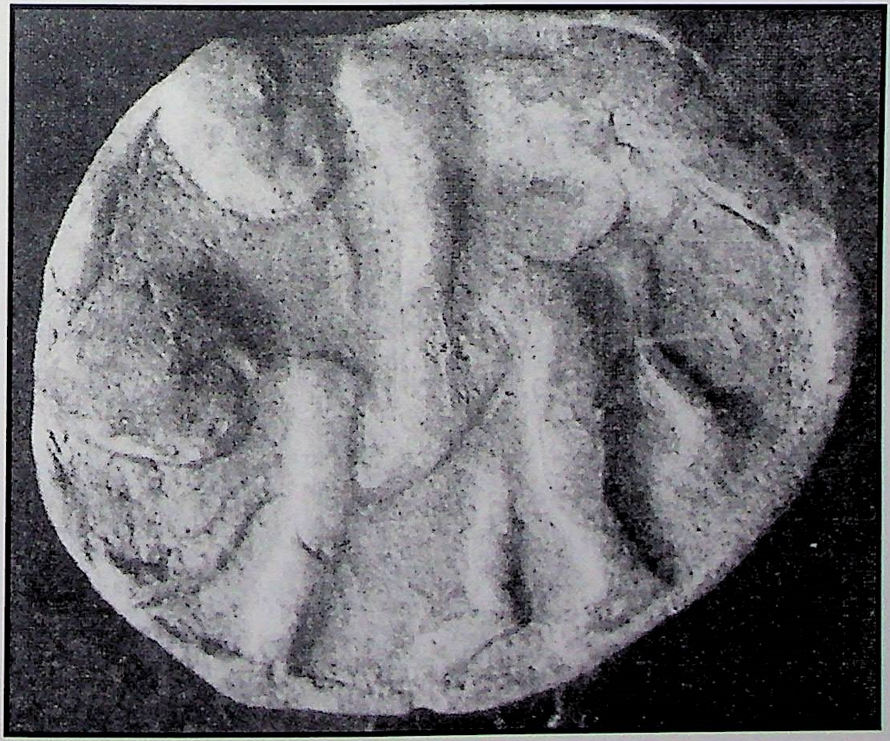

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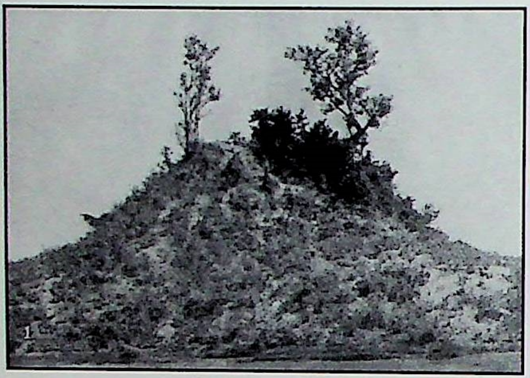

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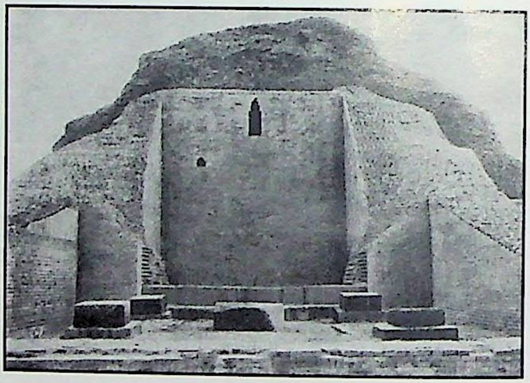

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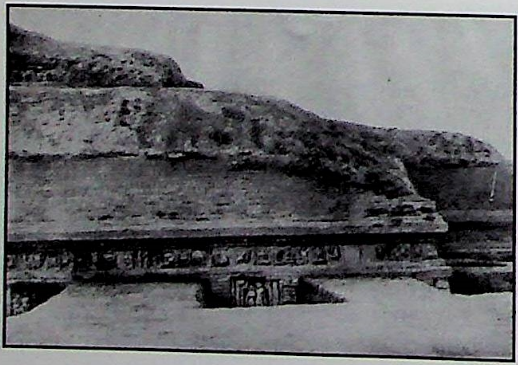

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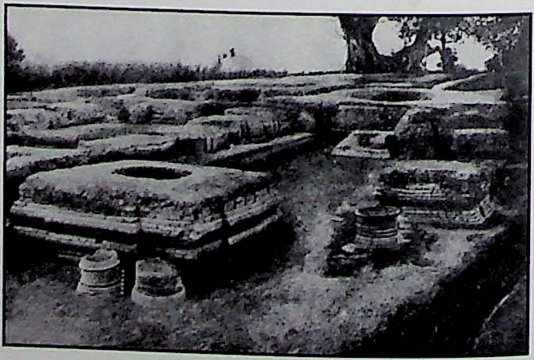

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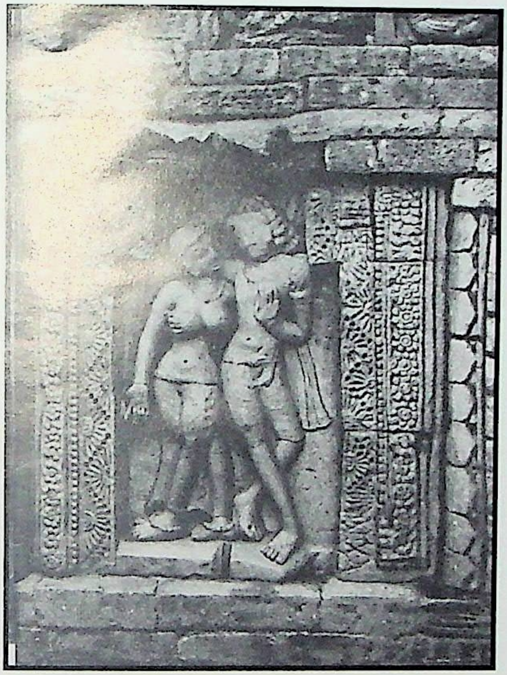

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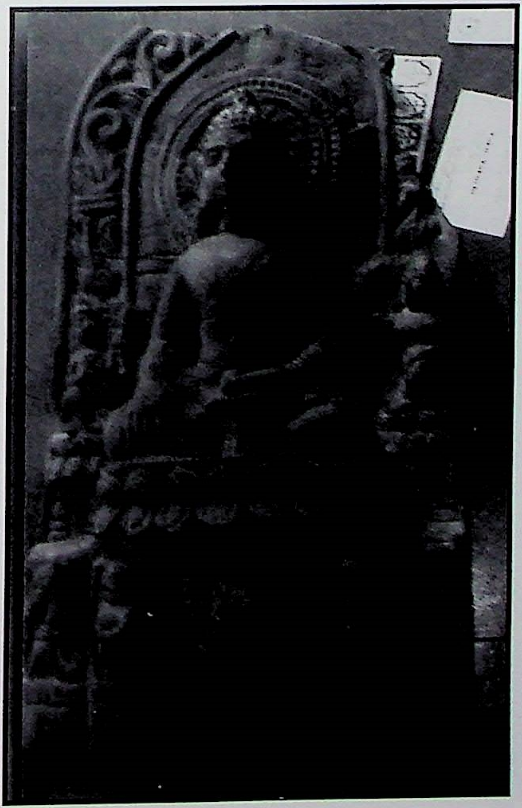

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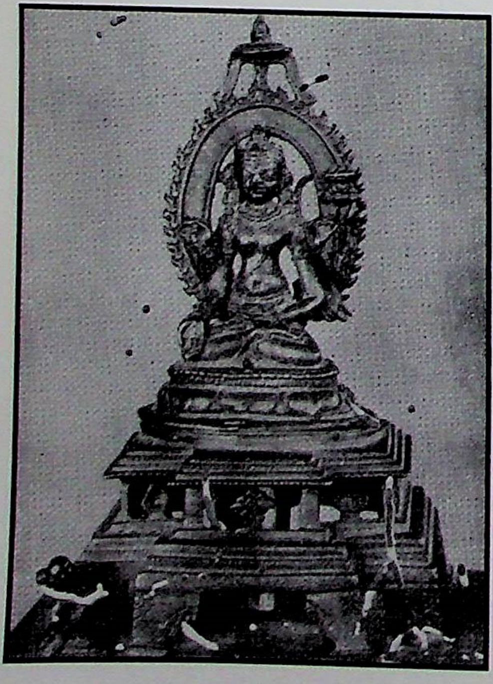

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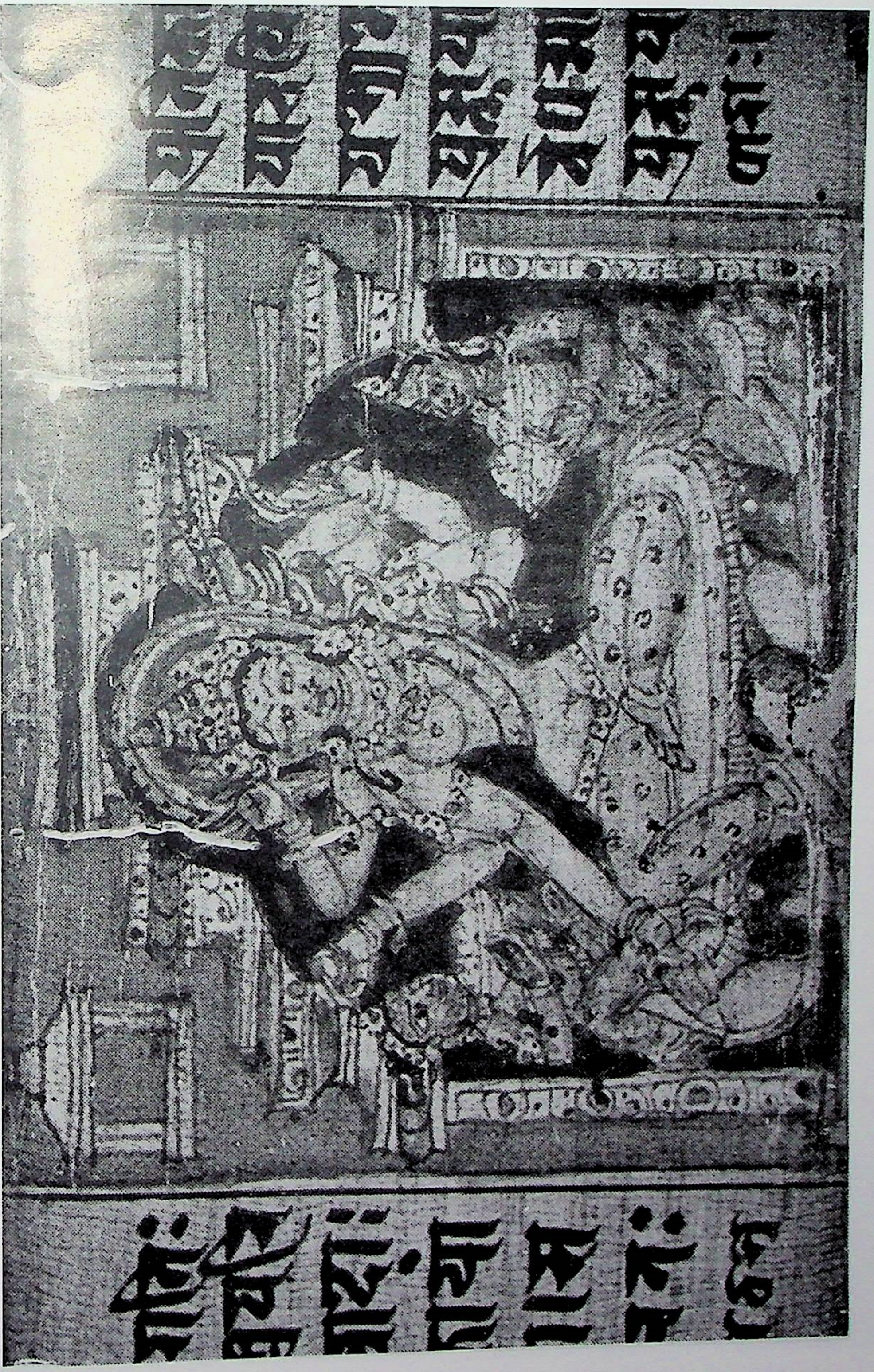

Vasudhārā

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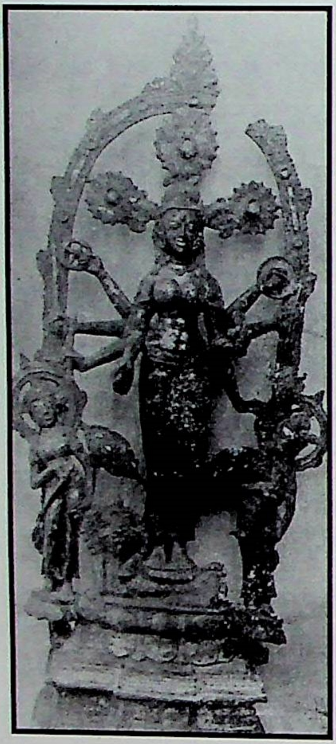

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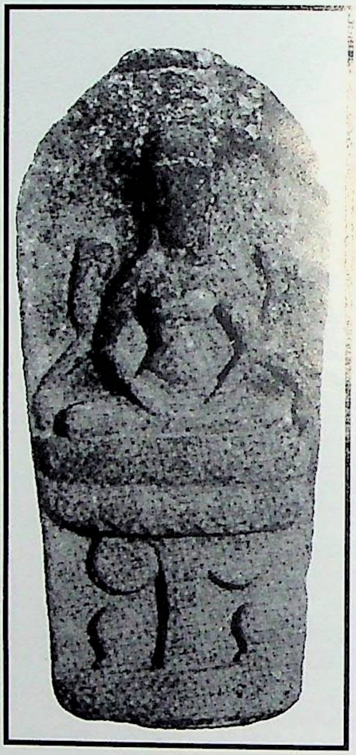

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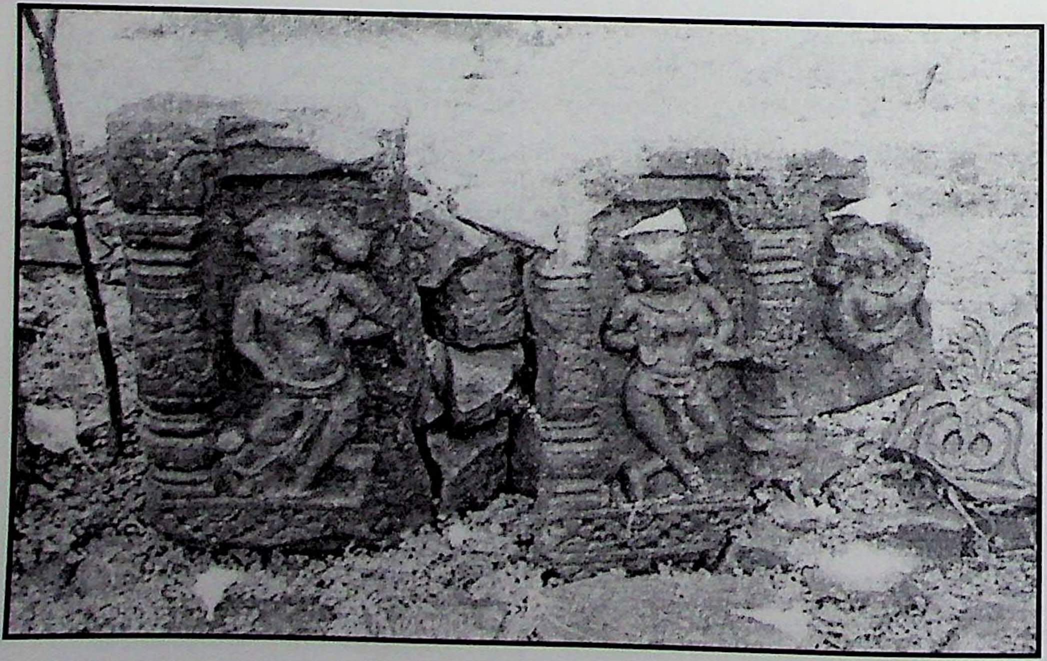

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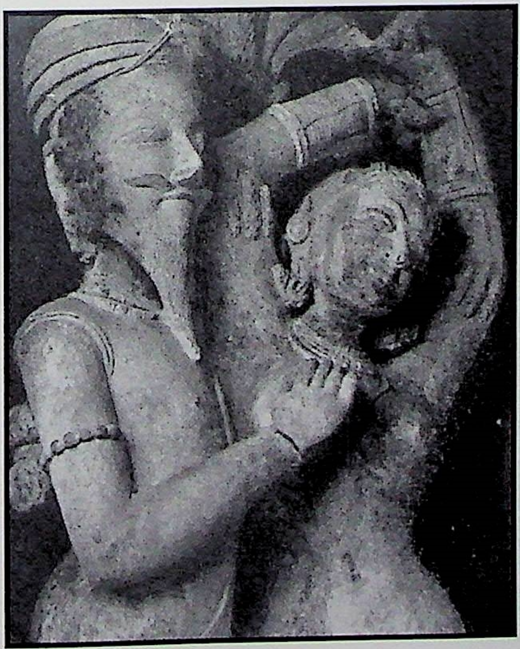

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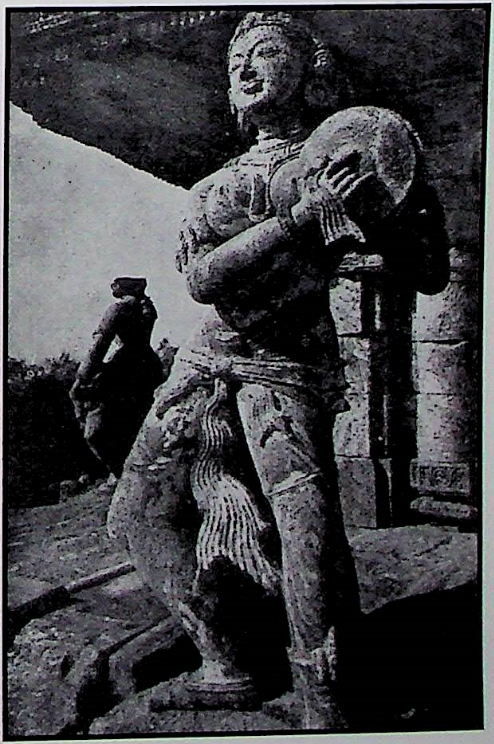

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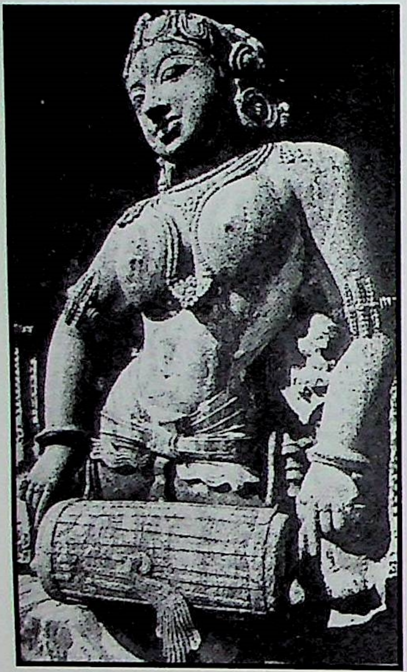

Fig. 1 : Dancer with a drum (Konarak)

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Fig. 3 : Dancer playing on cymbals (Konarak)

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PLATE - XXI

Fig. 1 : Nāginī (Khiching)

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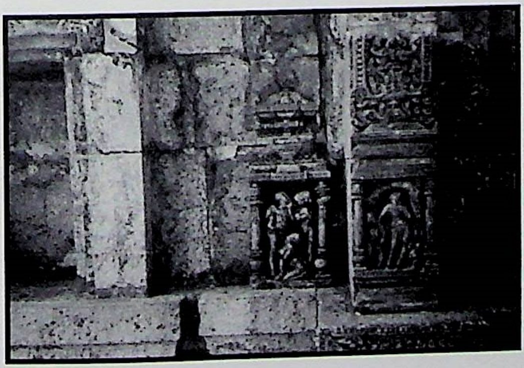

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PLATE - XXII

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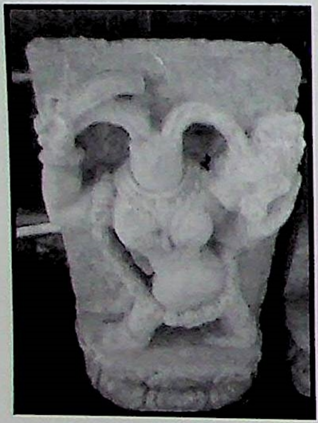

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Fig. 4 : Passionate love

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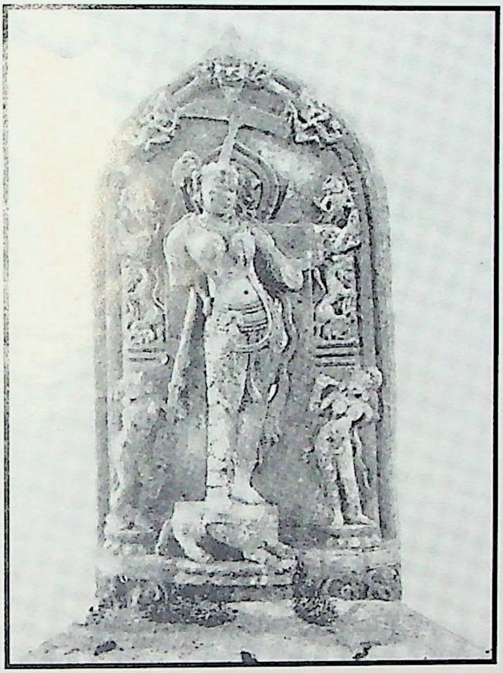

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About the Book

Rarely has so much effort been packed into one macro-level study of Indian iconography. Travelling extensively throughout the length and breath of six eastern Indian States of Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Assam and Tripura, over a period of five years, defying extreme climates, ignoring extremist threats, and braving the inhospitable night outs on unknown roads, historians Malaysankar Bhattacharyya and Susanta Kumar Biswas have managed to put together some of the rarest stone sculptures and terracotta figurines of eastern India. Some of these might have already been relocated in museums or archaeological galleries and catalogued, others not so fortunately placed in obscure private collections, but almost none were classified under a specific subject heading—**eroticism**. And not just innumerable exquisite plates of erotic sculptures, the authors have succeeded in putting forward an exhaustive study of the contemporary society, economy, polity, religion, and even food or dress habits, to recreate the perspective that inspired these bold and wonderful creations. In doing so, they have brought to fore the age old debate of aesthetics versus evangelicalism, artistic expression versus profanity, and human instincts versus conservatism. Instead of making it a heavy academic exercise alone, the free-flowing language and unencumbered expressions of the authors, makes the book a thoroughly readable one.

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